Heaven's Rage

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Heaven's Rage

by justheretoreadhannibalfics

Summary

Jack is concerned about asking Will to consult on his recent series of abductions. It might be too close to home for Will. But he could really use Will's unique way of seeing things. Surely everything will be alright. He can keep Will from getting too close.

Will was abducted as a teenager, and held captive for a time. The fear and abuse from that part of his past have left him feeling broken, but he's functional. For the most part.

Fic Playlist: https://open.spotify.com/playlist/5s8XOhYed7k9mCiQEyjq3f?si=SxiKpMDiSoCrzpNAFp8z2w

1

Will woke with a start, suddenly aware of a presence in his room.

He didn't have time to register that the figure was not his father before he was being pinned to the mattress and a cloth was being pressed to his mouth.

Will tried to hold his breath, thinking of chloroform like in the movies. His heart was beating fast, and his lungs began to burn with the need for air. His fear was working against him in that sense, and he had no hope of fighting the man off of him. The man was too large and strong, and had the element of surprise. Will was too young and panicked.

Will's vision began to darken at the edges, and he took that reflexive gasp that he couldn't stop. The kind that made someone fill their lungs with water and drown when they were pulled under the water. The kind that came just before a death that felt like your lungs were tearing themselves apart.

The cloth smelled sickly sweet, like rotting fruit, and it filled Will's mouth, nose, and lungs. He felt his muscles grow weaker as he breathed it in, and whatever fumes he was inhaling started to take effect.

The man made a soft shushing sound as Will's vision went entirely dark and he knew he was going. It wasn't as quick and complete as the movies showed it, being knocked out with chloroform. It was too gradual, leaving Will able to understand what was happening and remember it later.

"Go on to sleep, little bird," the man crooned, one hand stroking the side of Will's face and touching his hair.

That was the last thing Will heard before he was gone to the world.

—

"Can I borrow your imagination?" Jack asked.

Will was instantly wary. Jack wouldn't be hedging like this unless he thought Will would have a good reason to say no. There were a few reasons Jack might be aware of that would lead him to think Will wouldn't want to help, and all of them were justified. Will had good reason to be wary, especially when Jack approached him like this.

"What's the case?" he asked, his eyes down at his work. He was just trying to pack up so he could head home. It had been his last lecture of the day, and he was ready to see his dogs and recharge for the upcoming day.

Jack reached out, likely meaning to place his hand over Will's to stop his avoidant fidgeting. The thought made Will's heart skip erratically in his chest and he yanked his hand away as if Jack had nearly burned him. Jack didn't try to reach further to touch him, but he didn't retreat

either. He set his hand on the top of Will's bag, effectively stopping him from going on with packing. Now Will had no choice but to listen.

"Six girls have gone missing," Jack said, "we just need to find some evidence of where they've gone."

Will could see why Jack wanted his help. And why he was being so careful about how he was asking. Missing girls. Abductions.

Will bit the inside of his cheek. He wanted to leave. Jack had been right to think Will would say no. He had been right to think Will might run. Will wanted to run away and not look back. His eyes were fixed on Jack's hand on his bag, the sentinel against his freedom.

"I don't create evidence, Jack," Will said, "I only interpret it."

Jack nodded, but his hand didn't move. Will wasn't getting away easily.

"Then come help us find some evidence. You know you can help."

Will sighed. He knew his bag would be held hostage until he agreed to at least look. Even if Jack didn't realize that was what he was doing. Will thought it equally likely he did as not. Jack acted without thinking more than one would expect.

"Okay, Jack," Will said, "I'll take a look."

Jack smiled, taking his hand away from Will's bag.

"Good."

Will was allowed to finish packing, and he walked with Jack to his office. Jack filled him in on the details on their way. As Jack spoke, Will began to get a clearer picture of what they were dealing with. The kind of motivations their kidnapper might have.

Looking at pictures of the girls, Will knew he was going to see the case through. Because they were dead. He knew they weren't being kept around. And because he knew they had all been frightened. It had likely been the last thing each of them had felt.

Will also knew one other thing. They hadn't been taken from where Jack thought they had been.

—

Will felt his lungs lock up and every muscle in his body tense.

There she was, in her bed. She wasn't supposed to be here. She had been taken.

From here.

Images flashed into Will's head. His own bedroom from when he had been fourteen. Dark, save for the light of the moon revealing the frightening silhouette of a man standing by the

bed.

All at once Will was in the bed of Elise Nichols. He was looking up at the man who had killed her. His silhouette at least. Instead of the memory of that sickly sweet gas filling his lungs, Will felt hands come together around his throat, cutting off his air. He was choking, powerless, losing consciousness. He was dying in the dark. Again.

Will tore himself free from the association and crashed back into his own skull.

He was sweating, shaking, and gasping for air. He had badly frightened Elise's father, who had stumbled back into the hallway and was leaning against the wall in a shocked daze. Will walked past the man, meeting Jack halfway back to the front door. Jack took one look at Will and seemed to understand that something was very wrong.

Will didn't remember exactly what happened after that, but he ended up outside, sitting in the back of an ambulance. An EMT asked him questions, and Will answered mechanically.

When the young man reached to take Will's wrist for something, everything snapped into sharp focus. Will jerked away, nearly falling out of the ambulance and scrambling away. His breathing began to speed up again and he was almost hyperventilating.

"Don't touch me don't touch me don't touch me," Will chanted under his breath, unable to help it.

The EMT looked at Will with wide, confused eyes, his hands up in confused surrender. He didn't seem sure what he was supposed to do in this situation.

Will was trembling all over, but he managed to walk back to where the dark FBI vehicles were. He found an empty one and climbed into the back seat. He locked the doors and closed his eyes, sighing heavily and trying to slow his racing heart.

This was bad. He had known it would be. But this was worse than he had ever thought.

And he would have to talk to someone after this. A psychiatrist. A doctor. General anxiety was alright for a consultant, but having a panic attack at a crime scene, undoubtedly frightening the victim's family, was not. This was serious. It was bad.

Will had managed to calm his heart and breathing, though there was a raw scrape from his thumbnail under his lower lip. The pain had helped to pull him back to earth, and now it stung and he could taste blood when he licked over it.

A tap came on the window beside him. His heart skipped once, but then he calmed it again, seeing it was Jack. He would have to talk to Jack, probably explain what had happened. He wouldn't like it, but he knew he would have to.

Will opened the door and stepped out, resisting the urge to glance all around in case He was there.

"EMT says you refused to be looked at," Jack said.

He didn’t sound angry or frustrated. For that, Will was grateful.

“Yes,” Will said, staring at Jack’s tie, “I’m fine, but I don’t want to be here anymore.”

Jack nodded.

“Then let’s get you out of here,” he said.

—

“Will, I’m recommending you get an eval,” Jack said carefully, as if Will might bolt or suddenly go rabid and bite him, “I got a recommendation for a shrink, and I want you to talk to him.”

Will had been expecting this. That was possibly the only reason he *didn’t* bolt or panic. He had been prepared for it.

So Will just nodded, staring at a stray bit of lint on Jack’s jacket.

“When?” he asked.

Jack was visibly relieved by Will’s reaction.

“His name’s Hannibal Lecter,” Jack said, placing a business card on Will’s desk, “tomorrow.”

Will was glad he hadn’t tried to initiate physical contact again. Probably, Jack was worried Will was broken and knew better than to make it worse. He also didn’t need to coerce Will into anything right now.

Jack filled Will in on the details of the evaluation and left, giving Will time and space to get his thoughts in order and prepare himself for what he had to do next.

Chapter 2

“Will Graham?”

Will stood up and approached the door where Hannibal Lecter stood waiting. There wasn’t room for him to get through the door without coming very close to the man, so Will stopped a few feet away, staring at the immaculate knot at the top of the paisley tie.

“That’s me,” Will said, bobbing his head a bit and swallowing down his building anxiety.

Doctor Lecter extended a hand, making Will reflexively cringe away. Before the man spoke, he realized his mistake and took his hand back. He also stepped farther out of the way, and something in Will’s chest loosened.

“I am Doctor Hannibal Lecter. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Will entered the office, relieved to see a spacious room, even a second floor with the walls lined with bookshelves. It was no cage, this office. It was not meant to hold people within the walls, but rather give them freedom once they had left.

“The pleasure’s mine, I’m sure,” Will said, wondering if Lecter would make him sit down and look at him for the evaluation, “where should we start?”

Lecter closed the door softly, the sound making Will flinch. But it wasn’t too bad. There were large windows, letting light stream in from the outside. It wasn’t like being confined at all.

He was alright.

Lecter took a seat in one of the leather armchairs, but didn’t ask Will to join him. Will walked cautiously over so he was standing by the windows, able to look out at the city.

“We can start wherever you like, Will,” Lecter said.

Will huffed a wry laugh. How very typical of a psychiatrist.

“Why did you leave surgery?” he asked. If Lecter wanted to be that way, Will could give as well as he got.

That seemed to surprise Lecter. He was silent for a long moment, just looking at Will.

“I killed someone,” he said at last.

When Will didn’t react, he elaborated.

“Rather, I failed to save someone, but it felt like killing them,” he said, “it’s not uncommon in surgery, but perhaps it happened one time too many.”

Will nodded.

“Now, you heal minds instead of bodies,” he said.

Lecter nodded, a small smile on his lips.

“And no one has died as a result of my therapy,” he agreed, “I admit to being surprised. I should have been prepared for a perception as keen as yours. I knew I would be speaking with an FBI agent, after all.”

Will shrugged.

He doubted Jack would have been able to surprise Lecter the same way he had, or any of his students. He didn’t work with many other agents outside of the labs, so he couldn’t be sure if they were all that way. He would feel vain to think he was the only person who could surprise Lecter.

“You use a scalpel to sharpen your pencils,” he explained, nodding his head towards the large desk where he had seen the scalpel and pencil sitting together, “your suit is entirely crisp lines, and your hands are strong. The scalpel is what really gave it away, but the rest reinforced it.”

Lecter nodded. He looked interested, rather than unsettled as Will would have expected. That was a good start.

“Do you find it easier to face the things you see and learn when you look at others, than to reflect on yourself?” Lecter asked.

Will laughed bitterly.

“Everyone does,” he said, “most people don’t have trouble breathing when they remember their past, though. That’s the only reason you ask. You’re trying to force me to look at myself by asking if I find it hard.”

Lecter didn’t object or deny it. He just watched Will as he spoke, faintly amused. That was actually a surprise, because no one liked to be told they were trying to force anyone else to do something. Most people would reactively deny it. But Lecter didn’t.

“What is it exactly that makes it difficult for you to breathe in moments such as that?” he asked, “is it simple panic?”

Will sighed and turned to look out at the city. He was already itching to go home. He didn’t want to be here. They were getting close to things he didn’t want to talk about. That was absolutely intentional, and exactly the kind of thing he was supposed to try to do for therapy, but it didn’t make it any easier to do. It didn’t make it any more palatable.

“I assume you are familiar with chloroform,” Will said, guessing as much. You learned about it for psychology, and he assumed you would learn about it for medicine as well.

“I am,” Lecter replied.

Will watched a lime colored sedan pass down the street. Someone who probably didn't know a thing about chloroform other than what was shown on television. Someone who didn't have to worry about it. Someone who wouldn't care if someone like Will disappeared.

"Have you ever actually been knocked out by it?" Will asked, turning back so he could see the man's reaction.

Lecter shook his head.

"No," he admitted.

Will nodded. He hadn't thought he had. It wasn't exactly a common experience.

"It burns," Will said, pacing along one of the shelves, "movies never tell you that, and psychology teachers don't think you need to know. It'll give you chemical burns on your skin. Along with that, it's apt to burn your nose and throat. And the vomit. It's not as romantic as media would have us all believe. Not as neat and clean."

Lecter didn't respond to that, but a glance told Will he was probably waiting for Will to talk about the other effects of the drug. The ones he really didn't want to talk about. Maybe it had been a bad idea to bring this up with a medical professional.

It was fine when he knew the person he was talking to couldn't imagine, couldn't understand, couldn't fathom the things that had happened to him. Then, he didn't feel as if it was necessary to say anything, much less *everything* . With Lecter, Will knew he was already guessing what had happened to Will. He was not an unintelligent man, and Will could guess he was able to make his own connections.

Not like Will could, but perhaps better than most.

"They don't show it right, but maybe they know about those other things," Will said, "maybe they know it all, and use it because they like thinking about those secret things they don't say. Because, if nothing else, aren't we all sick in our own way?"

Lecter tipped his head, apparently interested by this turn in the conversation. It was turning into more of a monologue, if Will was honest. But he was wound up and anxious, and didn't seem to be able to stop just yet.

"Because maybe the people writing these stories find a twisted sense of pleasure in the thought that chloroform is addicting, that it-" Will paused, not sure he wanted to say this, but he did it anyway, "- *excites* people. They don't even care that it can cause brain and liver damage. Or maybe that excites them too."

Will decided to stop there. He had been feeling all that anger towards the world for a while, and hadn't realized he needed to vent it to someone who could almost understand. But that was enough.

"You are angry that your experience is made light of," Lecter said, "upset that you were never educated on it, and by extent others are likewise neglected."

Will huffed bitterly.

“Yeah. Such a normal problem, isn’t it?” he asked, “so pedestrian and uninteresting. Exactly what you would expect.”

Lecter stood and approached Will. When Will tensed, Lecter stopped at once.

“Do you feel it is less worth feeling, because it is not unique?” Lecter asked.

Will ran a hand over his face.

“What a narcissist you would make of me, Doctor Lecter,” he said, “wanting to be different.”

The truth was usually the opposite. He wanted desperately to be like other people. He wanted his life to have no dark corners, no holes in the floors of his mind. He didn’t want to see all the things he could see, or know the things he knew. He would like to have entered this office without seeing that Lecter used to be a surgeon, or that he was independently wealthy and only did this to occupy his mind. Essentially to entertain himself.

“Not at all,” Lecter said casually, “I am of the opinion that those who long to be different truly have traits that are unique, but might long to be recognized as such.”

Will didn’t respond, and Lecter seemed to come to a decision.

“But you are not like that,” he said, startling Will slightly, “I think you do not wish to be special. You are unique, and you wish to change that. The fact that your feelings about this part of your life are the thing that align with expectation feels like an insult to your senses.”

That had cut right to the core of it. Will shrank in on himself, and he stepped further away from Lecter in a feeble attempt to get away from a danger that was long past. He was always running from it, and now was no different.

“What makes you think I’m so special?” he asked, but the strength had mostly gone out of his voice.

Lecter walked to the large desk, giving Will even more space. Will was grateful for it.

“You have acute empathy, and keen observation. It’s an uncomfortable gift, and allows you to see much more than you would like. You can assume the point of view of anyone,” Lecter said, as if he could truly know all of that already, “So now I must ask you something.”

Will looked up at the same time as Lecter, accidentally meeting his eyes. He was frozen, though out of fear or simple surprise he didn’t know. It was like looking into the night sky. A few points of light like information, nearly consumed by the deep of the void. He didn’t know what Lecter was.

“Do you wish to continue consulting for Jack Crawford?”

—

Will sat on his porch, a glass of whiskey on his knee and the dogs milling around in the yard.

Will knew what psychiatrists would make of his pack. Of the way he lived, alone and isolated with half-assembled motors and almost finished fishing flies on the desk. He knew what they would make of it, a few of them had tried. It didn't matter. He didn't care. This was his sanctuary. He would keep it, if nothing else.

He hadn't expected Lecter to ask him that. There had been plenty of things he had expected Lecter to ask. Psychiatrist things. "Oh you poor broken man" things. "Let me make the pain go away" things. Asking if he wanted to keep helping Jack had never crossed Will's mind as a possibility.

Will downed the last of his whiskey and stood up, stretching his spine. The dogs recognized this as a cue to return inside, crowding up onto the porch to be let in.

Will opened the door.

It was little surprise, then, that his response had been surprisingly honest. Will had told Lecter that, whether it was a good idea or not, he simply had to see this case through. He had essentially sold a part of his soul when he had seen Elise Nichols in that bed, and could only make good on it if he saw it through.

Lecter had nodded along all the time, and Will had expected him to insist Will was not stable enough to continue the work no matter what he wanted. Instead, he had drafted a plan.

Will filled the dogs water bowls and checked them all for tics or thorns.

The sun was setting outside, and he was feeling the familiar draw of sleep. He knew better than to expect rest tonight, but his body demanded a few hours of sleep from him. Torment or not.

Will was cleared for work, on the condition that he come to weekly sessions with Lecter. Once this case had finished, they would visit the issue again and decide the best path forward.

All things considered, Will couldn't have hoped for a much better outcome.

The dogs all settled into their beds, and Will settled into his own. The sky was growing dark, now, and Will closed his eyes. He did what he always did, forcing his breathing to slow as he imagined the stream. If he was lucky, that would be the only thing he dreamt of that night.

There was something about Lecter that made this agreement not nearly as horrible to him as it would have been with almost anyone else. He hadn't forced Will to say anything he hadn't wanted to, hadn't even asked Will to talk about his past. And his eyes. Mostly empty, with just glimpses of thoughts.

Will hadn't been overwhelmed by Lecter's eyes. It had been safe.

Maybe Lecter was safe for Will.

Will drifted off to sleep.

3

“My little bird.”

The crooning words reached Will, huddled down in the dark. Will kept his head down on his knees. He didn’t want to look up. He didn’t want to see the man who was holding him here. The man who had taken him, who touched him and groped at him, and who always brought with him the smell of what Will now believed to be chloroform.

It couldn’t be safe for him to be breathing it in so much. He was sure of it. But after the first few times, he found he missed the smell, as rotten sweet as it was.

You’re getting addicted , a voice in the hollow of his skull said, *it’s a drug, after all. You’re addicted, and any day it might kill you.*

Will tried not to think of it. Only tried to think of escape, if there was any chance of it.

“Look at me,” the voice demanded, and Will had no choice.

Being alone left Will so open and vulnerable to the man’s mind. Will had been horrified when he realized the man knew, and liked it. But in some way, that might have been the reason he was keeping Will alive for so long.

Will looked up and met the man’s eyes. Those grey eyes that always flooded him with associations and feelings.

Will took an involuntary gasp in, almost choking on the fumes. He could see too much. Too much.

The man had seen Will’s dad today. He had passed by the house and seen Monty Graham heading out with an armful of fliers. He must have gone to a store and paid to have them printed. They didn’t own a printer. And they couldn’t afford this either.

The man had stopped and taken a flier, promising to spread the word and call if he saw a hint of Will.

The man had spoken to Will’s father, while Will was here in the dark.

But the absolute worst part was how excited the man was. This had filled him with energy, and there was only one thing he did with his energy these days.

Usually, Will was allowed to eat before the man began his fun. But not tonight.

—

Will woke up, gasping for air and blinking in the dark. Winston jumped up onto the bed and lay down on Will’s lap, moving to press him back into a laying position. The feel of his fur

and the press of his weight made Will feel better a bit, and reminded him he was safe. He was in his own home, and with his dogs.

His eyes adjusted to the low light of the moon coming through the window. He allowed Winston to push him, laying down and sinking his hands into the soft fur of his dog.

Winston was Will's favorite, though he wouldn't tell the others that. Will thought he was the smartest of the pack, and this was one of the things that made him think so. Will had never taught him to do this when he had a nightmare. He had just seemed to know it.

"I'm alright," Will said, focusing on his breathing and trying to calm his racing heart.

He wondered if that was honestly the truth. He was certainly less alright than most people, but he knew it could be worse. He was alive, and independent. He was doing a job that saved people's lives. He wasn't stuck in a hospital, raving and strapped to a bed. He was free, and mostly healthy.

He could deal with the frequent panic and anxiety attacks.

Will managed to fall back to sleep with Winston's comforting weight keeping him grounded. His dreams were not pleasant, but he did not wake again before morning.

—

"They're calling him the Minnesota Shrike."

Jimmy continued, as was his habit, while Will stared at the scene. The body. The stag head.

He was filled with conflicting emotions, but somehow not overwhelmed by any of them.

He felt an echo of offense, as this was clearly a public humiliation of the girl. She had been rejected by her killer.

He felt relief when he heard her lungs were missing, had been removed while she was alive and using them. He imagined how free it would feel to have nothing in his ribcage but his heart, no pressure making him choke. No lungs that could be filled with the noxious scent of rotting fruit.

And he felt anger, that someone would waste her like this.

He was finally seeing things like their cannibal. He wasn't stuck in the mind of the victims anymore. It was like someone had shown him the negative of a photograph, and he was finally able to see the positive.

"He loves them," he said, and immediately Jack was attentive. "Because he loves her. He has a daughter. Same profile. She's growing up and leaving home. He can't stand the thought of losing her."

Everything was coming into focus, and Will could see the monster they were chasing.

The Minnesota Shrike. A little bird.

They had to find him before he turned on the young bird he was caging and killed her.

—

“I hear they are sending you out to conduct interviews,” Doctor Lecter said casually.

Will nodded, rubbing his hands on his jeans. He was pacing around the office again, glad Lecter allowed it. Jack wanted Will to help them find the Shrike, now that he could see him so clearly. Identify a list of suspects and then interview them to find the killer.

Will hadn’t done this more than once or twice, years ago. He wasn’t entirely sure what to expect.

But he felt calmer, for a strange reason. Whenever he felt his heart begin to speed up, the image of Cassie Boyle, with no lungs to be squeezed, entered his head. He hadn’t had a problem breathing since then. Not yet.

It was strange, and likely something he should be concerned about.

“Yeah,” Will said distantly, “Jack thinks I’ll be able to recognize our killer faster than anyone else.”

Lecter nodded, watching Will’s slow circuit in front of the windows.

“I imagine that is so,” he agreed, “and what of the copycat?”

Will jumped a little, feeling like Lecter could see into his head. Of course, he couldn’t. That was something left almost exclusively for Will. But being a psychiatrist was probably fairly close.

“I don’t know,” Will said, shaking his head, “they probably won’t kill that way again. They don’t really have anything to do with the Shrike. Maybe they were hoping it would be attributed to him so we wouldn’t know we’re looking for two killers.”

Will found that hard to believe, because he thought the copycat was smarter than that. It wouldn’t have been so different if they had wanted to hide their identity. They would have done better.

Lecter seemed satisfied with that answer, if not pleased. He didn’t show emotions as obviously as most, and Will liked it. He wasn’t as overwhelmed when he was around him.

“How do you feel about doing these interviews?” Lecter asked.

Will wet his lips and sighed softly. He honestly took stock of himself, and was surprised by what he found.

“I feel fine,” he said, glancing at Lecter with a wavering smile, “I actually feel alright.”

Lecter smiled lightly, standing and coming over. Again, he stopped when Will showed the first sign of discomfort.

“Tell me about the copycat,” he said, “I worried it would have upset you, given the nature of the scene.”

Will nodded, frowning a bit. In truth, it probably should have caused him more stress and anxiety, her lungs being cut out. She hadn’t been able to breathe. He knew that fear too intimately. It should have been horrifying.

But he just felt calmed by the imagery of her empty chest.

“It’s funny,” he began slowly, “I couldn’t really see the Shrike before. I was so stuck in the minds of the victims, and I couldn’t get out. But that scene was practically gift-wrapped. As soon as I saw it, I was able to understand our cannibal. Everything just accentuated the differences between what happened there and what the Shrike does.”

Lecter nodded, looking out the window at the city. It gave Will a chance to study him for a moment.

Will hadn’t expected to find Doctor Lecter interesting, but now he did. Lecter didn’t push Will’s boundaries like everyone else did. He felt around the edges to determine where they lay, then prowled around on his side of the line, just looking in and observing.

Will wondered if Lecter would tell him the truth if he asked about it.

“You felt no discomfort in your chest or trouble breathing?” Lecter asked.

He looked curious, and not truly all that concerned. That pleased Will more than he would admit. Everyone was always concerned about him.

Will shook his head, scratching at the scruff of his jaw. He wondered how Lecter would react.

“Actually, that’s been a bit better since,” he admitted, “whenever I feel my breath catch in my chest, I imagine her ribcage, empty and open. Nothing but her heart. And it gets better.”

Will furrowed his brow and risked a quick glance up at Lecter to gauge his reaction.

“That’s weird, isn’t it?” he asked.

Lecter smiled kindly.

“Not at all, Will,” he said, “while I could not have predicted such a reaction, it is certainly preferable to the adverse. Tell me, do you imagine what it would feel like to have your own lungs removed? Your own chest emptied and left hollow?”

Will felt as if Lecter’s words had somehow caused his mind to go skipping, like a smooth stone across a pond. Images rippled through his mind. His chest, cracked open like an oyster. The ribs exposed. A fluttering bird trapped behind the bars of his bones. His heart, thumping

softly and reliably. The empty spaces where his lungs no longer were. The way they gave room for the bird to flutter about.

Blood pooling around Will's body, creating a crimson pattern spreading out from his open and exposed chest.

Will was so consumed with these images he didn't notice that Lecter had stepped just a bit closer, and into Will's line of sight.

"Yes," Will breathed.

The sound of his own voice brought Will back, and he found he was looking directly into Lecter's dark eyes. He froze, feeling his muscles instantly tense and hold him in place.

"And how does that make you feel, Will?" Lecter asked, his voice low and serious.

Will swallowed, but he was held in place by those eyes. He couldn't look away, and he felt as if he had no choice but to answer.

"Free," he said, "at peace."

Lecter smiled and nodded slightly, pulling away and walking to his desk.

Will snapped back and a shiver ran over him. It was like he was shaking off water after a sudden downpour.

Despite himself, he actually didn't feel like Lecter had done anything wrong. He had only made Will uncomfortable for a few seconds, and then had retreated. Will had room to recover from the moment of shock, and it hadn't been all that bad to begin with.

"I would like to accompany you on your journey to find the killer," Lecter said, plucking a notebook from his desk and opening it, "I think it would be advantageous for me to have the chance to see you working, and assess your working environment. Additionally, if anything were to go wrong, mentally or physically, I would be there to help you."

Will crossed his arms over his chest and rubbed at his arms, a self soothing motion he had become very familiar with. His heart was beating fast, but he wasn't having a hard time breathing. He could still imagine his lungs had been taken, and there was nothing to be constricted.

"Why would you want to do that?" he asked, frowning, "you're not on the case except as my therapist. I mean, I guess you can ask, but I don't understand why you would want to."

Lecter looked up at Will, silent for a moment. Will didn't look at him, instead tracing the pattern of the rug with his eyes as he paced. That didn't seem to bother the man, though, and eventually he did answer Will's question.

"I want to ensure your safety," Lecter said.

Will frowned.

Usually, when people said something like that, it was out of pity, and Will could feel it radiating off them like a rancid stink. Otherwise, people didn't say that kind of thing, because they didn't actually care enough to do anything to protect him or help him.

Lecter actually seemed to mean what he said. He wasn't going because he thought Will needed help doing his job. He was coming because he wanted to be there *in case* Will needed help *keeping his sanity* .

Will was inclined to agree, against his better judgment.

4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Look at me, little bird,” Will’s captor crooned.

Whenever he used that name for Will, his tone turned sickly sweet, like molasses. It made Will think of the Boston molasses flood. Candied destruction.

Will looked up and winced when his eyes met the steel grey of his captor’s. He had only been down here for three days, but he was learning the pattern of things. His isolation made him vulnerable to the man’s mind, and unable to really refuse his commands. *Look at me* was his favorite so far.

Will still didn’t know the man’s name, and thought it was likely he had no intention to tell him.

“Tell me what you see,” the man said, hankering down in front of Will now he was sure he had his attention.

Will had made the mistake of revealing that he could see things. He had tried to relate to the man, to sympathize with him. It had been a bid for sympathy in return. He had hoped the man would let him go if he could make him see him as a person rather than an object.

It had backfired.

“You’re unhappy,” Will said nervously, “something happened at work today, and you’re unhappy.”

The man reached out and took a handful of Will’s hair in his hand. He pulled hard enough it hurt, and tears sprang up in Will’s eyes. But Will already knew better than to look away.

“ *What* happened?” the man asked.

Will didn’t want to do this. He didn’t want to keep giving in to the man’s every demand, reading his face like a newspaper every day. He didn’t want to be forced to look, forced to see. It had always been an uncomfortable gift, and now it was daily torture.

“Someone didn’t secure something properly,” he gasped out through the pain, “you were almost crushed.”

Will knew he worked as a construction worker. He built houses or something. Building sites were dangerous places.

The hand loosened in his hair, letting Will relax just a bit. The man nodded, running his hand through Will’s hair the way one would pet a dog. His features softened a bit, but there was

still that edge of cruelty behind it. There was always that sharpness. The man changed like the sea, never calm for long.

“And what would happen to my little bird, if I were killed?” he asked softly.

Will swallowed.

He wasn’t meant to answer that one. The man didn’t want Will to answer, he wanted Will to be frightened.

And he was. Will knew very well what would happen to him if the man died. No one else knew Will was here, and who knew how long it would be before anyone came by to see about selling the abandoned, dilapidated house.

With Will’s luck, they wouldn’t bother coming in before they knocked it down to make a parking lot or something.

That wasn’t true. There would be a chance the man’s death would mean he could be saved. It wasn’t likely, but he knew he was spiraling down the path of worst case. It’s what the man wanted. And what the man wanted was all that seemed to matter down here.

“My dear little bird would bash itself against the bars of the cage, dying as it tries to get free,” the man mused.

Will was helpless not to see how pleased that thought made the man. He was excited at the idea of Will, broken and bloody down here. Forgotten by everyone. Left to die broken and alone.

Will was trembling now, and that excited the man more.

—

“Do you really want Doctor Lecter to come with us to Minnesota?” Jack asked.

He looked genuinely curious, confused about Will suddenly being what he considered to be sociable.

Will shrugged.

“He’s the one who wants to come,” he said, “but I don’t see any reason to say no. It’s not like he’s going to cause problems.”

Jack huffed, apparently bewildered. Will understood that, seeing as he was generally resistant to bringing more people into the part of the case he was working. Even the lab team made him nervous. It made sense Jack would be confused about Will wanting Lecter to join them.

“Alright. I think it sounds like a good idea.”

Will nodded. He knew why Jack thought it was a good idea. He wanted someone who could pick up the pieces if Will fell apart. Doctor Lecter was just an insurance policy against a

mental breakdown.

Will didn't care. He thought it would be an opportunity to learn more about Doctor Lecter, and for Lecter to get a better understanding of the job. Then, the negotiation after this case would be easier for them both.

Jack was standing very close to Will, making him tense and uncomfortable. He did this often, trying to desensitize Will to his presence. Will hated it, but knew addressing it would only make Jack frustrated and more prone to argue with him on things.

"What sort of things should we be looking for to identify our guy?" Jack asked.

Will shifted away from him a bit, moving the pictures around on his desk. He wondered if Jack could see his pattern of organization. He wondered if Lecter would.

"Just anything peculiar," he said, "It could be something small. He's very good at not seeming suspicious, but I think people find him strange all the same. Like he's not quite what he claims to be. Almost human."

Jack frowned. He didn't like Will's answer. He wanted specifics. A blueprint.

Will sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose.

"It could be anything, Jack," he reiterated, "if I make a list, and it's something else, we could miss him. I'll be there to help. I just can't be much more specific than this."

Jack looked at Will, concerned. It made Will silently seethe, because he hated having anyone pity him, and Jack only became concerned when Will didn't do exactly what he had wanted. Jack only wanted a tool he could use.

That wasn't fair. Jack thought he was just worried about someone he might even see as a friend. Jack didn't see the pattern of his concern. He didn't realize his concern grew when he felt Will wasn't being helpful.

It still rankled Will.

"Do you think Doctor Lecter will be able to help you identify something peculiar?" Jack asked, picking up one of the pictures and frowning at it, "does he know enough about the case to be of use?"

Will shrugged. He hadn't talked about the case with Lecter as much as he thought Jack believed. Lecter might not know much.

But Will had an idea Jack had asked for Lecter's opinion on the case. He thought Jack had Lecter on file as a consultant for the case, and not as Will's therapist. That would mean their sessions were really just conversations, not official in any legal capacity.

Jack would want it that way so Lecter would not be bound by doctor-patient confidentiality, and could legally discuss Will's mental state with him.

It was exactly the kind of thing Will would have expected from Jack. It was clever, and he didn't even feel upset with him for it. It did surprise him if Lecter had agreed to it easily, because it seemed rude. Lecter didn't strike Will as someone who tolerated rudeness, so it would be strange for him to be doing that. Unless he thought Will was aware of the situation.

And Will was. He hadn't been told, but he had guessed. In that way, perhaps Lecter wasn't doing anything uncouth.

"If not, he'll at least be a sounding board," Will said, trying not to show how uncomfortable Jack's lingering presence was making him, "and in the worst case scenario, he can glue me back together. Your purposes will have been served."

Will felt a bit bad for the jab, especially when he saw that it had landed. Jack was ever stoic, showing only anger and frustration outwardly, but when he was honestly hurt or sad his expression softened a bit around the eyes and the corners of his mouth turned down.

"I know he and you have come up with a plan for some kind of negotiation once this case is over," Jack said, confirming Will's theory, "how do you think him joining for this will affect that?"

Jack thought Will was trying to quit. He thought Will meant to play it up for Lecter on this case so he wouldn't be cleared for any more. He thought that was Will's plan and reason for agreeing to let Lecter come along.

Will was irked by that, but he understood it at the same time. If he wanted to quit, he might do something like that. To avoid confrontation.

"I think it can be a chance for us to better understand each other," Will told Jack vaguely.

Chapter End Notes

This fic now has a playlist:
https://open.spotify.com/playlist/5s8XOhYed7k9mCiQEyjq3f?si=457f32788fbf40d5

If you have been thinking it seems like this fic has been distracting me from my other WIPs, you are absolutely right. XD I'm obsessed with this idea, and haven't worked on projects I'm supposed to be doing because I'm too busy with this. Sorry not sorry.
I hope you're enjoying it. <3

5

Chapter Summary

Breakfast date!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Good morning, Will," Lecter said.

He was standing outside Will's motel room door, dressed and immaculate, with a bag in hand.

"Doctor Lecter," Will said, surprised, "uh, good morning."

The corners of Lecter's eyes crinkled, and Will thought it was a smile. Then, Will froze when he realized what this was. Lecter expected to be invited in. It would be rude not to.

But it was a small room with only one small window, and only one escape route. The thought of having someone come in and shut the door behind them was enough to get his heart racing.

As always, Lecter noticed Will's distress. He stepped back a bit, so he wasn't blocking so much of the sun with his body, and gestured to his bag.

"I have made breakfast for us both," he said gently, "perhaps there is a park nearby where we could eat."

Will let out a huge breath, nodding with relief.

"Yes. Thank you. I just need a moment to change."

Will was wearing flannel pyjama pants and a T-shirt, and he didn't really want to go out in them.

Lecter's eyes quickly flicked over Will's attire and he nodded.

"I can wait," he said, "And the fresh air will do us both some good, I expect."

Will nodded, and Lecter turned so it wouldn't feel as if he were shutting the door in the man's face. Lecter really thought of everything, it seemed. He anticipated Will's needs. It was nice.

Will quickly dressed, shoving everything back into his duffel bag when he was done and going back to the door.

Doctor Lecter was standing casually, hands in his pockets. He should have looked awkward, stuck out like a sore thumb. Instead, he managed to look as if he belonged exactly where he was. Like there wasn't anywhere else he possibly could be in that moment.

Will shut the door and Lecter looked up with a smile.

"I believe I have located a park with tables where we can enjoy our breakfast," he said, stooping to pick up the bag at his feet, "It will only be a short walk."

Will nodded, relieved he wouldn't be stuck in a small, confined place like a car with the man quite yet. Hopefully, he would be able to get some coffee before then.

"That sounds fine," Will said, smiling nervously at the man, "I don't suppose coffee's included?"

Lecter's returning smile was warm, and it made Will feel good. Like Lecter actually cared.

"Of course," he said as they began to walk down the street, "I am not familiar with the area, so I took it upon myself to make that as well. One way to assure quality."

Will huffed a laugh. He was tense from their proximity, the sidewalk not allowing for much distance, but it was different than with Jack. Jack always felt like he was trying to convince Will it was alright. With Lecter, now, Will thought he would remedy the situation if he could. He was actually aware of Will's discomfort, and doing what he could to minimize it.

"If I were more concerned about it, I might say you're not doing much to keep a professional distance," Will joked, trying to keep things light so his startled bird of a heart might get the message.

Lecter hummed softly, tilting his head to draw Will's gaze towards a bright park with picnic tables. Will was glad it was so close.

"If that were more of a concern to me, I don't believe I would be here now," he replied.

Lecter had mimicked Will's speech. It might have just been to encourage a rapport, make Will more comfortable, but it struck Will profoundly. Will was always the one who adopted other's ways of speaking, and it was a strange relief to have the script flipped that way. To have someone reflect him back, rather than always being the mirror for them.

"Are you doing this for Jack?" Will asked, unaware he meant to do it.

Lecter frowned softly, unsure what Will meant. Will shook his head, trying to put his thoughts in order.

"I mean, are you doing all this so you can tell Jack what I'm thinking? Keeping a finger on the pulse of my stability?"

Lecter didn't answer for a long moment, apparently deep in thought as they reached the park and chose a table.

“It appears Jack did not deign to tell you the nature of my consulting relationship with the bureau,” he said finally, setting his bag on the table and taking dishes out, “but you have discovered it on your own. He should have expected as much. To answer your question, no. I am not treating you with respect and courtesy simply to earn your trust so I may relate everything you say back to your employer.”

Will nodded. He wasn’t sure he believed it entirely, but he was willing to accept it for the time being. He didn’t think Lecter would have shown up with breakfast and coffee for just anyone, but he didn’t think he was lying about this.

“Thank you,” Will said honestly, sitting down on the bench and offering a tired smile. His night had been tormented with dreams, but he had not died. He was already exhausted, but he was alive. “Jack means well. I know he does. He just lets his ambition get in the way of his empathy at times.”

Lecter nodded, setting a folded napkin on the table where Will could reach it, then spreading one on the table at his own seat. He probably would have spread Will’s for him if he hadn’t been aware of the discomfort Will had with nearness.

Will spread his napkin, mirroring Lecter as well as he could.

“I think Uncle Jack sees you as a bird with a broken wing,” Lecter said, his tone casual as if it meant next to nothing, “Injured and helpless, yet resistant to aid. Afraid of the very hand that tries to heal you.”

Will blinked up at Lecter as the man served some food onto a plate for him.

That had been unexpected, yet Lecter’s words rang true. Will thought that was exactly how Jack thought of him. Something to be pitied, and helped whether it wanted it or not.

“At least now I know I’m not the only one you’ve been psychoanalyzing,” Will huffed, bewildered, “do you disagree with him?”

Lecter looked at Will, studying him carefully, but not cruelly. It didn’t feel like he was looking for a weapon to cut Will with. Just make out the shape of him.

“I do not agree with him,” Lecter said at last, “I have not yet decided what I make of you, but I think there is a metaphor more immediately apt.”

Will raised his eyebrows, taking a bite of the food and chewing slowly. It was delicious, the eggs still steaming in the morning air.

“I think you are more like a wolf raised as a pet. Reprimanded until you repress your true nature. One day, with some encouragement, you will come into your own.”

Will frowned.

That was… not what he had expected. It made him sound too powerful, too strong. No one would have called him either, seeing the way he cringed away from any small touch and

trembled when he was forced to make eye contact. Most people would be more inclined to agree with Jack's assertion that he was a broken bird.

My little bird.

Will shuddered and forced his eyes down to his food. He took a drink of the coffee, disappointed when he found it wasn't hot enough to burn his tongue. Pain often anchored him to the present.

"It's delicious. Thank you," Will said.

If Lecter was nonplussed at all by the change of topic, he didn't make it known.

"My pleasure, Will."

—

The car ride actually wasn't bad. Lecter sat quietly in the passenger seat, not forcing conversation or interaction. Will was allowed the time and silence to put his thoughts into order. To put his mind back into the space of the Shrike.

Will had explained to Lecter what they were looking for over breakfast, so now they just had to look carefully for anything that was odd. Interestingly, Lecter hadn't had any problem with the vagueness of Will's explanation.

To Will's relief, Lecter took the lead explaining themselves to the stubborn and resistant secretary functioning as the keeper of the files. He was much more polite and convincing than Will would have been. They were let into the office, even as the woman called her employer and began to complain about them.

Will was grateful for the task, distancing himself from everything as he just scanned through files.

Name, address, phone number. Name, address, phone number. Over and over. Looking for anything peculiar.

Name, phone number.

Will looked again.

Garrette Jacob Hobbs. No address.

That was the kind of thing the Shrike would do. He wouldn't want anyone to come looking for him. Wouldn't want it to be too easy to find him.

This might not be him.

But it might.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter has some action! Some really exciting stuff, if I do say so myself.
I hope you're enjoying it so far <3

6

Chapter Summary

Showdown at the Hobbs home, and another look into the basement of Will's past

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lecter had asked how Will felt about doing the actual interviews. Will had expected it to be his way of introducing his own opinion, but he had been wrong.

Will had told him he would be able to do it, it would be easier for him to know if they were the killer if he met them in person. He had promised to let Lecter know if he felt at any time that he couldn't continue.

Lecter had nodded his head and said nothing. He had just let Will speak.

Now, here they were. At the home of Garrette Jacob Hobbs.

Will was feeling anxious from all the time he was spending in the car with Lecter, but he thought he could get through one interview at least. Then, he would call it off for the day.

Everything happened fast.

The woman was pushed out the door, bleeding. Will heard a scream from inside. Then, he was looking at them both. The Shrike and his captive bird. The girl Will had only seen echoes of in all the pictures of the missing and presumed dead.

Will's mind tried to push him back into the dark basement of his memories. It tried to remove him from the real danger by giving him one he had defeated long ago.

He didn't let it. Not yet.

Will fired as the man dragged the blade across his daughter's throat. The man went down after too many shots. Will saw blood everywhere, and the man had cold, grey eyes.

My little bird.

Will fell to his knees beside the girl, trying to stay in the present moment with her. His mind was rebelling, the pull like a hidden riptide beneath the waves. He felt power flowing through his veins, the euphoria of overcoming someone who hurt people. The girl was still alive, but there was so much blood.

“Will. Look at me.”

Will covered his ears, but he couldn’t look away from her desperate, wide, blue eyes. He couldn’t touch her, but he was helpless to look away.

That order made him angry, though.

“ *No* ,” he grit out, “I *won’t* look at you. You can’t make me. You’re dead.”

A hand came into view, covering the wound in the girl’s neck as the other tipped her head.

Will couldn’t breathe. He could smell rotting fruit, and his chest felt like it was being crushed.

“Will. Think of Cassie Boyle.”

It was Lecter’s voice.

“Remember, you don’t have any lungs to constrict. You are free of that burden.”

Will gasped in a breath of air, falling back away from the girl and Doctor Lecter. He brushed against the cooling corpse of Hobbs and he cringed away.

Will curled in on himself, retreating against a wall as his vision warped and changed. Lecter was trying to talk to him, but he was far away. In the future.

—

“My little bird.”

Will grit his teeth and breathed shallowly to avoid taking in a lungful of air that smelled like rotten fruit. The man always carried it with him.

He was done being called that. Done being told what to do. He was done with it all. He was going to end it today, one way or another.

“Look at me.”

“ *No* .”

There was a beat of absolute silence, in which Will could hear the universe pulse.

“Look. At. Me.”

“I will not.”

A hand landed in Will’s hair and yanked, pulling his head up. Will closed his eyes, even though it would put him at a disadvantage. He had to keep from looking.

“Little bird. Do I have to break your wings?”

Will knew what the man would do next. He was counting on it.

A hand came up and touched Will's face.

Will snapped his teeth, clamping down on the man's fingers. He bit hard enough blood spurted into his mouth and the man screamed. Now, Will opened his eyes, and saw that for once the man wasn't looking directly into his eyes. The man was staring at Will's mouth, where his fingers were still trapped and bleeding.

The man pulled hard on his hand, shredding his flesh in Will's mouth and failing to free them. He was only causing more damage.

At last, the hand fell from Will's hair, and Will grabbed the man's shoulder.

Will had been picturing this since the moment he had woken in the basement that first time. He had gone over every possibility, planned every reaction. He had learned the man's mind so well he could predict him down to the last breath.

Will spit the man's hand out at the same time as he pulled down with both hands and lifted his knee. The man's nose made hard contact with Will's knee, and there was a loud crack. His nose was broken, and Will had never felt so viciously satisfied in his life.

The man crumpled to the ground, and Will stepped over him. He had not been chained for the past two months, as well as he could count. He had been too placid and submissive for the man to think he would try to escape.

That didn't mean the locks hadn't been engaged.

But when the man came down, he never locked it behind him. He trusted himself to keep Will controlled.

A hand closed around Will's ankle, and he fell onto the cold floor of the basement. He caught himself on his hands, saving his face from the same treatment of his captor, but he felt a snap in his ankle and a sharp cold pain arched up his leg.

Will let out a string of curses that would have made his dad blush, and kicked out with his other foot. He felt it come into contact with something, and the man let go of Will's leg and began choking.

Will looked back and was satisfied to find he had hit the man in the throat. Now he knew what it was like to not be able to breathe.

But he was still scrabbling for Will, trying to catch him.

Will wasn't having that.

Will turned on his knees and lunged, digging his nails into the man's face. His mind was entirely consumed with the desire to claw out his eyes. Those eyes that had been holding him here more surely than any chains or locks. Those eyes that had been torture and pain, and his only window to the outside world.

The man was screaming still, but Will didn't hear him anymore.

A hand scratched at Will's face, and he caught it with his own hand, twisting hard until he heard the bones break. The man passed out from the pain, falling limp under Will.

Will didn't stop until the blood had stopped flowing, the body growing cool under him.

He was dead.

—

Will snapped to consciousness all at once, crying out in panic. He felt as if he couldn't breathe. His lungs were locked and tight, his chest heavy like he was being swallowed by a snake.

Will tried to gasp for air, but nothing happened.

"Will, remember Cassie Boyle."

Will didn't recognize that name. He didn't know why that would be important in this moment. He was suffocating, and it didn't make sense to try to remember some random girl.

"Remember her empty chest. There are no lungs to be constricted. No breath to be choked. Imagine that is you. Imagine someone has taken your lungs. You are free from them."

The picture slammed into Will's mind like a bus hitting a pedestrian, and he pulled in a huge breath. His mind began to clear, and he remembered Cassie Boyle. Her lungs were removed while she was alive. She had been mounted on a stag head and left for the birds to forage.

He pulled in another breath, and another. He was breathing fine.

Doctor Lecter was the one talking to him, reminding him how to breathe.

"Very good, Will," Lecter said, and there was a note of relief in his voice, "keep going. When you feel you can, tell me your name."

Will kept breathing for a moment, swallowed, then spoke.

"I'm Will Graham," he said breathlessly, barely gasping it out.

Lecter smiled and nodded. He was sitting by Will's hospital bed, but not touching him. Will was distantly grateful for that, but couldn't express it yet.

"Yes. You are in the hospital. It is four in the afternoon. You lost consciousness after the shock of your run in with Garrette Jacob Hobbs."

Will nodded, one hand on his chest. His heart was pounding against his ribs, like a small trapped animal. But he was alive. Again.

"I killed him," Will said.

Lecter tipped his head, then nodded.

“You did. In an attempt to save his daughter, you shot him.”

Will shook his head, his breathing coming steady now as his heart slowed. The room was large and well lit. He was safe.

“Not him,” Will said, “I killed the man who abducted me.”

Lecter stilled, as if movement might stop Will from continuing.

Will offered a wavering smile.

“You’re curious. I know you have been. Everyone always is. But no one has heard the whole story except the policeman I called when I got out of that house. I killed him before I got out. I clawed out his eyes. Nearly bit off a few of his fingers, too.”

Lecter’s eyes were dark and intense on Will, but they didn’t make him feel frightened. He was still riding the high of reliving that memory. The power of defeating the man. The euphoria of deciding he would die.

“You freed yourself of him,” Lecter said, his voice low.

Will nodded, smiling softly.

“I finally did,” he agreed.

Then, Will remembered what had happened in the house. With Hobbs.

“I killed Hobbs,” he said slowly, “saving his daughter.”

Will looked up at Lecter, feeling his heart twist with fear and hope. He felt his stomach sink when Lecter frowned and shook his head gently.

“She did not make it to the hospital,” Lecter informed him, “her trauma was too great, and blood loss too extreme. I could not save her.”

Lecter looked down at his hands, and Will furrowed his brow. He wondered if Lecter felt as if he had failed.

Then, Will had a horrible realization.

“You had to worry about me,” he said, wincing, “you had two patients and two dead bodies. Oh my god. I can’t believe I would do that to you. This is entirely my fault. I shouldn’t have agreed to you coming. You’re not supposed to be in that kind of situation. That wasn’t supposed to happen.”

“Will,” Lecter said sternly, looking up and catching Will’s eyes, “do not blame yourself. You were not meant to be in such a situation either. My conditions for Jack were very clear that you were not to be put in any danger. You were only meant to consult.”

Will lifted his hand and began dragging the nail of his thumb along his lower lip. He hadn't known Lecter had given Jack any conditions about his safety. It was both irritating and comforting. Again, it felt as if Lecter actually cared about him, but it also irked him because he hadn't asked for that and Lecter hadn't told him he was doing it.

"Still. I'm at least part of the FBI. I've been trained for that kind of thing. You're just a psychiatrist who's consulting as a favor for Jack. So he can get away without making you legally my therapist. At the very least, I should have been able to be lucid after it all happened and you were trying to save that girl's life. I should have been there to help you."

Lecter smiled sadly, as if Will had made him think of something from long ago.

"We can talk about this later," Lecter said.

As if that had been his cue, Jack entered the room with a bang, making Will cringe back against the pillows.

"Will. You're awake."

Will nodded silently, staring down at his hands. The rush of adrenaline from his memory and the panic of his waking had worn off, and he was left just as jumpy and spooked as ever.

Chapter End Notes

I promised some action. Did I deliver? ;)

7

“How are you doing?”

Will looked up, staring at Jack’s shoulder. He frowned. It had been a couple days since the incident, and Jack hadn’t come by the classroom to bother him until now. Will had thought he was afraid to.

Jack didn’t usually ask him how he was doing. Jack didn’t usually think about it.

Maybe the situation with Hobbs had spooked him. Maybe the scare of Will being in the hospital had knocked some sense into him.

More likely, Doctor Lecter had spoken with him.

“I’m fine,” Will said, gripping his bag defensively, “could be better.”

Jack nodded. Apparently, Lecter hadn’t coached him on how to keep the conversation going past that.

“Uh, you have an appointment with Doctor Lecter today?”

Will was about to leave to go to Lecter’s office, actually. Jack probably knew that. He had an angle. Of course he did.

Jack wanted to know if Will was going to keep working with him.

“Yes,” Will agreed.

Jack would have to ask, if he wanted to get an answer.

Jack sighed, likely realizing exactly that.

“Look. I know we messed up with the Shrike case. I know you have every reason to stop. But I want you to recognize that what you can do will save lives. You found this guy. We didn’t have any leads before you came on, and you found him. You can help. I just want you to consider that.”

Will nodded, but didn’t reply otherwise. He felt like it was cruel of Jack to say that stuff to him. He knew exactly what was at stake. And he knew for sure Jack had already said similar things to Doctor Lecter. Probably right before he had come to see Will just now.

None of that changed whether or not Will was capable of doing the work.

Jack waited, but Will didn’t answer. He was done explaining himself to people who didn’t listen. He wasn’t going to bother.

Finally, Jack sighed.

“I know you and Doctor Lecter are going to make this decision together, and I don’t get to tell you what to do. I just want you to know that you make a real difference.”

That was surprisingly warm, coming from Jack. Surprisingly kind and soft. Will wondered if that was from Lecter or really from Jack.

“I know, Jack,” Will said, “It’s really not possible for me to forget.”

And it wasn’t. It was impossible for Will to forget that there might be more girls taken, frightened, strangled, butchered. If he hadn’t found Hobbs.

—

“Uncle Jack is anxious for you to be cleared for work,” Lecter said.

Will smiled at the hint of derision in the man’s voice. Jack had talked to him. Will wondered if Lecter had expressed his distaste to Jack or not.

“Yeah. He has made his feelings on the matter abundantly clear,” Will said.

Lecter watched as Will walked around on the balcony in the office. During the first few sessions Will hadn’t dared, afraid of letting himself be easily cut off. The ladder was the only way down, after all. But this time, he had thought he would try it. He was curious, and he was enjoying the way the office looked from above. Lecter had remained beside his desk for now, not coming near the ladder at all.

“How have you been feeling these past days?” Lecter asked.

Will huffed, running a hand over his face.

He had been having even more nightmares than usual, waking up gasping for air and shaking. He was even more jumpy and nervous. He had nearly had an anxiety attack in the middle of one of his lectures. He was not doing well.

“Just wonderful,” he said bitterly, “Never felt better. Maybe it’s the new great form of therapy. Everyone should go and shoot a man.”

Will grimaced at himself and glanced at Lecter. The man didn’t seem to find his comment strange or rude at all.

“Sorry. I haven’t been sleeping.”

Lecter nodded as if he had expected that. Will thought it likely he had. The shadows under his eyes had probably given him away the moment he had shown up at Lecter’s door.

“I imagine that has been quite difficult for you. Do you wake suddenly, fighting for breath, possibly trembling?” Lecter asked.

Will sighed softly.

“All of the above. So I’m just peachy.”

Lecter was silent for a moment, watching as Will touched a few of the smooth book spines.

“You told me you killed the man who abducted you. Would you care to share more details of that part of your life?”

Will bit his tongue.

He had started this. He had offered the first opening to this. He had told Lecter the part of the story he hadn’t told anyone else since Lirette.

“Did you tell Jack about that?” he asked, feeling his face heat with shame at the thought. He didn’t want Jack to know.

“No,” Lecter said, and Will thought he sounded truthful, “I see no reason why he needs to know. Furthermore, it is not my tale to tell. If you ever feel he should know, it is yours.”

Will smiled bitterly. It was funny. Lecter was the first psychiatrist to say that to him. They usually encouraged him to share his experience with anyone close to him. Anyone who made him feel comfortable.

In a way, he had followed that direction. No one ever made him feel comfortable. Not even the psychiatrists. None of them had ever heard all of it. Lecter already knew more than anyone else other than the police officer who had been there all those years ago.

But he did feel comfortable with Lecter. Possibly more so after everything that had happened in Minnesota.

“Thank you,” Will said. He felt like he had said that more to Lecter since meeting him than to anyone else in the past six years.

Lecter inclined his head in acknowledgement. In some way, Will was more comfortable with that than if he had verbally told Will he was welcome for the courtesy.

Will sighed, nodding to himself.

“I was fourteen when he took me,” he began, clenching his fist by his side, “right from my room. Spirited away in the middle of the night. He used chloroform. I was just a kid. I couldn’t fight him.”

Will took in a deep breath, fighting the sensation of the room growing smaller. He thought of Cassie Boyle and her empty chest, and he felt better, though there was the faint, ghostly, lingering scent of rotting fruit in his nose.

“He had me for almost a year,” Will continued, though his voice had begun to waver just a bit, “they told me later, his name was Steve Walters. I never knew his name when he had me, though. He never told me.”

Will closed his eyes, chewing on the inside of his cheek and imagining himself, flayed open with an empty ribcage. Just his heart beating away within the cavity.

“Every day he would say the same thing to me. Look at me. Look at me, look at me, look at me. That was his favorite game. After he realized I could see the things I can see, he was always asking me to look. He would make me tell him everything I could see. And that was just the beginning of it all.”

Lecter didn’t interrupt. Will thought he might have even been holding his breath in order to not make a sound. His expression was not one of pity, but there was an underlying hint of shame, and Will knew why.

“I apologize for exacerbating your condition in the Hobbs residence,” Lecter said, and it was an honest apology, “Had I known, I would not have said that to you.”

Will nodded, smiling thankfully.

“You had no way of knowing,” he said, “so you don’t really have any reason to apologize. I guess it just goes to show I really do need to be open for this whole therapy thing to work.”

The mark of bitterness in his voice was easily picked up by Lecter.

“You *are* open, Will,” he said, “I would not have expected you to tell me your entire life story at our first conversation. Very few patients do. What you have been through will take time to process. You need not even tell me everything today. What you have shared is enough.”

Will sighed in relief. He had been afraid of saying more about that time. He would have to relive it if he went into detail, and going over everything all in one day would have left him like an exposed nerve.

“I want to get better,” he said, and his voice was raw with the truth of it, “I really do. I’ve just never met anyone who made me think I could. I can always see too much, and the truth about most people doesn’t tend to inspire me to have faith in them.”

Will shut his mouth and clenched his jaw against any more words he might spout. He was frequently surprised by his tendency towards frank honesty when talking with Lecter. At the same time, he understood it uncomfortably well. Lecter was the first person who had made him feel understood. Lecter seemed to know things. Seemed to be able to empathize with Will for once. He reflected Will, just as Will was always reflecting the world.

Lecter smiled.

“I am pleased I can offer you a safe place to explore your past,” he said sincerely, “I hope we can continue to make progress with your memories.”

Will nodded. He hoped so too. But he was done with that for the day.

“So, what should we tell Jack?” he asked, “I don’t think it’s really a good idea for me to come face to face with another serial killer. But I don’t want to abandon it altogether.”

Lecter tipped his head.

“Do you feel you owe it to Jack?” he asked, “or is there another reason you do not wish to stop the work that so clearly harmed you?”

Will rubbed at his face.

“Jack certainly hasn’t done anything for me I feel like I need to pay back,” he said, “But I know he’s a good man, and he’s trying to do what’s right. Part of it might be that I don’t want to be the reason his conscience is uneasy. I don’t want to go back to my classroom, and hear about the next one. One I could have stopped.”

Lecter nodded, walking towards the windows. His expression was thoughtful, and Will wondered what he was thinking. It was harder to guess Lecter’s thoughts than most people, which was a relief to Will. It also made him interesting.

“If you continue, it must be with more distance. You must be remote, and selective. Do not take cases that will cause you such strong associations, and protect yourself.”

Will closed his eyes and nodded. It didn’t exactly make him happy, but it was probably the responsible thing to do. He should be making his own health and safety a priority, even if it wasn’t the highest on the list.

“So, what? I can only look at pictures and bodies once they’re in the lab? I’m under office-arrest?” he asked, only half-joking.

“Not at all,” Lecter said, and Will tensed when he did. He was closer. Will turned to locate him. “I think you would be relatively safe to be at crime scenes, depending on the nature. I would discourage you from entering small or enclosed-”

“Could you step away?” Will asked, his breath coming short. Lecter was standing at the bottom of the ladder. He was blocking Will’s escape.

Lecter stopped talking, glanced at the ladder as if he hadn’t even realized where he was, then stepped away toward the center of the room once more.

Will sighed, catching his breath.

“Thank you. Sorry,” he said.

“You need not apologize,” Lecter said, “I rather think I do, though. I was thoughtless.”

Will shrugged and offered a wavering smile.

“Don’t worry about it,” he said, “but, you’re right. Jack couldn’t get me into an enclosed space with a corpse if my life depended on it. I should set that boundary early, so he’s not frustrated by it later.”

Lecter nodded.

“Of course, I am not aware of every thing that might cause you distress, but I think it is safe to say you should not be confronting suspects or conducting interviews,” he said.

It was all very reasonable. That didn’t make it any easier to accept. Will knew it would slow things down if he never met the suspects or had the chance to ask questions of witnesses. He couldn’t just write up a list of questions Jack would have to ask, because he usually didn’t know until he was in the moment. He wouldn’t be able to read people. Will knew he could do more.

But he would probably suffer if he did. He should be setting clear boundaries now.

“Yeah,” Will huffed, almost a laugh, “after the way my last interview ended, it’s probably a good idea to avoid them for a while.”

Lecter’s eyes crinkled in that way they only did when his smile was real. Will liked to get that reaction from the man.

“Indeed,” Lecter agreed, “though you must never feel you are at fault for how that ended.”

Will hummed, frowning.

“Hobbs knew we were coming,” he said, “someone called him before we showed up.”

Lecter tipped his head.

“Who could have known?” he asked, “who could have known we were on our way, and would have warned him?”

Will shook his head. It didn’t make sense. Someone had been following the case carefully. They had to have been watching, somehow. And they had to have some reason to warn him.

“I think it was the copycat,” he said, “I don’t know how they knew we were coming. I don’t know if they did know. They might have just guessed, or told him we knew in order to scare him into acting rashly.”

Lecter watched as Will walked back to the top of the ladder. Will appreciated the beats of silence Lecter allowed during their conversations. He never felt as if he was expected to fill them, and they didn’t make him uncomfortable.

“Why would the copycat do such a thing?” Lecter asked at length.

He wanted to know what Will thought the copycat had wanted.

Will smiled bitterly.

“They were curious what would happen,” he said.

8

“We’ve got a scene,” Jack said, “It’s outside. Open. Will you come?”

Will nodded.

It was strange, because for the first time in his life therapy seemed to be working on him. He was having good days more frequently, and his trouble breathing was much less after Cassie Boyle. He supposed that might not have much to do with Lecter, but the man had immediately identified it as a way to help Will when he was in the middle of an attack.

This case would be another test run. To determine if he could help in the way he had outlined, and if Jack would let him.

On the way to the scene, Jack explained what it was.

Ten bodies, buried in perfect rows. Exposed hands. They had been buried alive.

Just from that, Will thought he could tell quite a bit about the killer. They were fastidious, had some level of medical education, and they loved mushrooms.

When they arrived, Will found the scene oddly peaceful. It was green and fresh among the still trees. Even the bodies seemed more calm and still than most. They looked almost happy.

Will closed his eyes and imagined what the killer had felt, what they had thought, what they had done. He could feel their pride and satisfaction once the job was done.

Will imagined the structure of a fungus. The mycelial networks extending from one body to another. Connecting them. Sensing other creatures when they came near. Will ran through what he knew of mushrooms, which was admittedly less than he would have liked in this situation. They liked sugar, and decay. They were noble decomposers of the natural world.

Altogether, Will thought this would be a pleasant place to end up. Asleep and slowly consumed by the mushrooms. Gradually becoming them.

“He’s looking for connection, Jack,” Will said, “mushrooms connect over miles. They can reach over whole continents. They mirror the structure of the brain, and communicate over long distances the way we have a single thought.”

Jack nodded, but he didn’t look all that interested. He was looking intently at a woman chatting with one of the local cops. She had tight red curls of hair and large eyes.

“Let’s get you back to the labs,” Jack said, “get more evidence for you to interpret.”

Will nodded, and at that exact moment the last body heaved, reaching out and gasping for air. No one was within reach, but the lab team quickly rushed over to the floundering man. Half the flesh of his face was gone, and Will didn’t expect him to survive the trip to the hospital.

It was unfortunate he had woken up. It would have been better for his final moments to be filled with the peace of slow decay. The frenzy of the scene after he woke wasn't a pleasant thing. Will was sorry for him.

Jack took him back to the labs.

—

It was starting to make sense in a more solid, tangible way now. Will thought Jack would be pleased.

"They're all diabetic," Will said, shaking his head when Price opened his mouth to object that they couldn't possibly know that, "They *are* . He's putting them into diabetic comas. They die of diabetic ketoacidosis. He doesn't have to bind them or constrain them because they're comatose. He's a doctor, or a pharmacist. I lean towards pharmacist, because it's lower profile and that's what he likes."

Jack was listening, nodding along and clearly more satisfied with Will's contributions now that he was talking about actions rather than emotions. Will felt jaded, upset that the thing Jack had asked of him was the least appreciated by him. Will's understanding came from emotions and motivations, not the facts of killing and violence. Jack asked Will to see and understand, but didn't want Will to share what he saw and share his understanding.

But right this moment they needed to find a killer.

"He switches their prescription. Then takes them when they aren't a threat or danger. He buries them in order to feed the mushrooms."

Price and Zeller stayed on the other side of the labs, knowing only that Will reacted poorly to people coming near him. Beverly Katz, though, seemed curious to see if he would be open to conversation. He wondered if she wanted to see if he was as unstable as he seemed, or if she honestly wanted to talk to him.

Just then, she didn't have the chance. Jack was making them all run a race against the machine.

Will eventually had to leave. The lights in the lab made it easier to stay for a while, but eventually the windowless walls started to get to him and his breath came short. It was a bit better now, when he thought of Cassie Boyle, but he still needed to remove himself from the situation before it became too much.

Fireflies lifted up from the grass of the fields behind his house as he pulled up, and he could hear the dogs barking from inside. It was quiet and peaceful, and he was safe here.

The walk to his door, alone and exposed, was one thing that made him nervous, but it was over when he opened the door and his dogs rushed out to greet him. They were his security system, his comfort, his family. He protected them, and they protected him. They were unwaveringly loyal and loving.

Will took them on a walk through the field, stirring up small clouds of fireflies like stars in the grass. He liked this house, away from everyone and everything, and he loved his dogs. He felt safe with them, and for the first time in his life he was happy with the direction his life was taking. He was doing work that helped people be safe, he could feel his fear slowly improving, dissipating as he allowed Doctor Lecter to help him, and he could come home every day to his dogs.

Maybe after this case he would go fishing. It had been a while, and he was feeling good. He wanted to do it again.

That was certainly a good sign. Will knew enough about psychology to know that becoming more interested in his hobbies was a sign of recovery. He wasn't used to applying psychology to things that didn't include murder, and he had always avoided trying to apply it to himself because it just ended up depressing him. He knew psychology in order to understand. He never used it to heal.

The dogs grew tired, and Will already had been. When Winston walked up and lay down on Will's feet, Will laughed and called them all inside. He checked everyone for thorns or tics and settled into bed.

Will lay in bed, staring at the ceiling, and thinking. He couldn't always get his mind to quiet right away, but he did have quite a bit to think about.

He wondered if Lecter would have some advice for his dreams. There must be something he could do about them. He hadn't told Lecter about them, but he expected he had guessed. It went right along with what Will had told him, and would make sense. It made more sense for Will to have nightmares than not to.

All he would have to do was ask. He knew Lecter would offer his opinion and advice, if Will only asked.

That was something Will really appreciated about Doctor Lecter. He didn't offer to try to fix all of Will's problems with his psychiatrist voodoo. He always waited for Will to ask. Even when Will had told him about his trouble breathing, Lecter hadn't tried to explain ways to combat it, breathing techniques and all that.

Will thought Lecter had likely guessed Will knew it all already, and hadn't insulted him by assuming otherwise.

Will closed his eyes and imagined his stream, slowing his breathing and listening to the slow and steady beating of his heart. The water rushed past his legs all around him, filling his senses.

—

Sure and steady hands cut into the flesh above Will's heart, parting the skin and exposing the brittle bars of his ribcage.

"Picture yourself without your lungs, Will."

It was Doctor Lecter's voice, but Will couldn't see his face. He just saw those hands, concealed within blue nitrile gloves, wielding a scalpel as if it belonged there. As if it was only an extension of the man's body.

"Imagine someone has taken them from you. You are free from that burden."

Will watched as the hands peeled away his flesh and revealed his lungs and beating heart behind the prison of his ribs. He gasped, watching as those lungs expanded, fighting the constriction of their home.

There was a sharp snap as the first rib was removed, pulled from his chest with a crack that shook in his teeth. One by one, those capable hands pulled and pulled until his lungs were bare and open to the air.

"Would you like to be free of the burden of breath, Will?" the voice asked.

Will wondered if he would be able to speak. Surely, he was losing enough blood he should be unconscious by now. Surely, he should be in unimaginable pain. Surely, the structure of his ribcage being compromised should interfere with his ability to speak.

Yet he did.

"Yes," he said, the word almost a breath itself, "yes. Please."

The hands descended once more into his chest, taking hold of the soft pink flesh of his lungs.

—

Will woke, blinking at the sight of sunlight streaming in through the window.

He had slept through the night for the first time since his abduction at fourteen.

9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I have neglected to ask before, but it occurs to me now,” Lecter said, sitting at his desk with a pencil in hand. Their conversations were growing more casual, not bound by conventional doctor-patient etiquette. Will was glad of it. “You are not uncomfortable carrying a firearm. Many in your position would be.”

Will huffed softly, nodding with a smile.

“Yeah. I understand that. But I’m not afraid of guns. *He* never used one to threaten or hurt me. I don’t think he even owned one. I don’t have any bad associations with guns, and I was raised in the south. I’ve been familiar with them longer than I’ve been afraid to shake someone’s hand.”

Doctor Lecter nodded. He seemed to understand, at least as much as he could.

“And your altercation with Garrette Jacob Hobbs has not changed that,” he noted, “despite the distress it caused you.”

Will shrugged.

“The gun isn’t at fault. If anything, I should have fired sooner. Abigail might still be alive if I had.”

Lecter tipped his head. He always looked at Will strangely when he talked about Abigail. Will wondered if he could tell Will’s emotions about her and the Shrike were all confused and tangled within him. Because he had instantly empathized with the victims and Abigail, but he had gotten into Hobbs’ head before the end. They were constantly at war within his head.

“Are you finding any trouble empathizing with your gardener?” Lecter asked.

Will shook his head, circling around near the desk as he walked.

“No, but that’s almost ironic, because it’s what he wants. He’s searching for connections, creating physical connections between them through the mushrooms. He envies their ability to connect in a way humans can’t.”

“In a way most cannot,” Lecter agreed, “All but you.”

Will huffed a laugh, shaking his head again.

“The connections I make aren’t physical,” he said, “But it’s probably the closest a person can get to what our gardener wants.”

Lecter nodded, smiling warmly. Those warm smiles were becoming more frequent, and usually followed his making Will smile first. Will wasn't sure if Lecter was smiling more because Will was, or if they were largely unrelated.

"How are you expected to participate in the remainder of the case?" Lecter asked.

Will hummed, turning back towards the windows.

"Jack wanted me to be more involved, of course, and I'm helping them narrow down the list, but I won't be out in the field," he said, "I put my foot down on that, and Jack didn't push too hard."

Lecter inclined his head thoughtfully, watching Will's slow progress around the room.

"If you don't mind me asking, would you describe to me the way Agent Crawford convinced you to help him in the first place?" he asked, "I imagine you did not jump at the idea."

Will chuffed.

"No, I didn't," he said.

Will described the scene, how Jack had been holding his bag hostage and then revealed the case dealt with abductions. As Will spoke, he noticed Lecter go still at his desk, his pencil no longer scratching at the paper. Will worried what he would see when he looked at the man. He could imagine he would be disappointed in Will for being weak and allowing Jack to wheedle him so easily. Or worse, he would pity Will for being taken advantage of.

When Will did look up, he was surprised by the icy cold anger in Lecter's face. He had never seen Lecter show any anger. The strongest negative emotion he had shown was annoyance, and only very briefly.

The surprise of it made Will stop in his tracks.

"I apologize," Lecter said with a soft sigh, "I imagine my anger is uncomfortable for you. I assure you I am not angry with you. Rather, my anger is directed at Jack Crawford."

Will frowned.

"You're angry with Jack?" he asked.

Lecter stood and came around the desk, putting his hands into his pockets and looking up at the balcony. He was oddly stunning for a psychiatrist, who Will always imagined as the pathetic, sleazy type, like Fredrick Chilton. Lecter was a refreshing change. Even attractive.

"I confess my anger comes as a surprise to me as well," he said, "I do respect Jack Crawford, but I find his behavior in this case repulsive."

Will was stunned into silence. He had honestly expected Lecter to take Jack's side, try to convince him he had been too sensitive and needed to work to get over his phobia of touch.

He had expected Lecter to use this as a good time to introduce some weird new kind of therapy he wanted to try. It's what almost any other psychiatrist would have done.

Doctor Lecter turned and looked at Will, their eyes meeting once more despite Will's aversion. Lecter smiled, almost apologetic.

"Does that bother you?" He asked.

Will couldn't help it. He burst into laughter. He laughed so hard he had to sit down in the chair he had thus far left empty for all of their conversations. Tears sprung into his eyes, and for a moment he wasn't sure if he was laughing or crying. He was hysterical.

Lecter looked bewildered and a bit concerned.

Will managed to calm himself down, wiping at his eyes with his sleeve.

"I'm sorry," he said, hiccuping a bit with lingering laughter, "I think that's the first time a psychiatrist has taken my side on something like this."

Lecter smiled, but still seemed somewhat displeased.

"You have spoken with other psychiatrists, yet you have never had a pleasant experience with them," he noted, his voice low and serious, "I dread to think who you might have seen."

Will sighed, still smiling a bit from his bout of laughter.

"You might be familiar with one of them," he said, "he's in charge of the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane these days."

Recognition flicked over Lecter's face, and Will thought he detected a hint of distaste.

"How unfortunate," Lecter said.

To Will's delight, Lecter showed no pity for him even now. He was just displeased with Chilton.

"Yeah. If you know him, you can probably guess how that went. He was more interested in what he considers an empathy disorder combined with a cocktail of neuroses than helping me with my trauma."

Lecter nodded as if he had been expecting that. Will was glad. He hadn't ever expected to meet a psychiatrist he could actually talk to, but he genuinely liked Lecter. He thought of him more as a friend than psychiatrist, but he worried it wasn't reciprocated.

"I highly doubt he would know how to help if he tried," Lecter said, surprising Will, "his specialty has always been observing, rather than acting."

Will thought that was pretty accurate for the man, and he smiled.

“Why, Doctor Lecter, I do believe you were just rude. I never thought I’d see the day,” he said.

Lecter’s returning smile was sly and conspiratorial, as if sharing a secret with Will.

“Certainly not,” he objected lightly, “If I had been rude, I would have declared he has no specialty other than gossip. I did the man a courtesy.”

Will laughed again. It had been a long time since he had actually laughed, and he felt good.

“I understand if this makes you uncomfortable, but I would very much like to cook for you, Will,” Lecter said when Will was quiet again, “I enjoy cooking for friends, and would like you to join me for dinner if that would not cause you distress.”

Will frowned, considering it. Lecter had called him a friend, which made him feel warm and pleased. But he didn’t often go to other people’s houses, because they always felt strange and cramped to him. He worried it would send him into another attack.

But who better to be with in that case? Lecter had already shown he could deal with Will’s attacks, and was actively helping them become less frequent and easier to come out of.

So could it really be that bad?

“I can try it,” Will said slowly, *wanting* to be Hannibal’s friend, “but I can’t promise I’ll be able to stay. I don’t know how I’ll feel.”

Lecter nodded, and he was smiling. He looked genuinely pleased.

“Wonderful. If you feel distressed at any moment, do not hesitate to tell me. I want all my guests to be comfortable in my home.”

—

“Why are you doing this?”

A hard slap to the side of Will’s face.

So far, he had been lucky. The man holding him had hurt him plenty, but hadn’t broken his bones or done anything that would leave a scar. He had more bruises than he could count, but nothing that wouldn’t fade or heal with time.

“You know why, little bird,” the man sneered, taking Will’s jaw in his hand and forcing his face up. He wanted Will to look him in the eye. “Look at me.”

Will winced, his hands reflexively moving to grip the arm of the man. He managed to stop himself in time, knowing trying to break the man’s grip would result in more blows.

So Will looked. He looked into the man’s grey eyes and was filled with fear at what he saw.

The man had liked the way Will looked. He had watched him for a while, learning his routine and when his dad would be gone. Will was thin, with bright eyes and dark hair. Just what the man liked. He had done this before, with other kids. He liked to hurt them, but not damage them. He wanted them to stay pretty.

After that first day, he had known Will was different. That he was special. Will had turned himself into what the man wanted. Meek, obedient, and quiet. Will had begun catering to his moods right away, doing what he wanted and never fighting.

It was his ability to anticipate the man's desires that had really made Will interesting. They almost didn't have to speak to each other at all.

When the man asked a question, Will answered.

That was how he learned just how special Will was. And how he had started asking the same thing of Will every day.

"What do you see?"

Will couldn't stop himself from seeing.

"You're crazy," he said bitterly, his voice wavering with fear, "you don't care about anyone but yourself."

The man tossed Will away with a sneer, and Will's head cracked against the concrete wall. His vision blurred, wavering as it dithered between going dark or not. The man was moving around, doing something.

"You know better than to insult me, little bird," the man said, "I can see it every time you look at me. But your fear makes you rude. Sit up. Eat. Then, we're going to have some fun."

Will bit his tongue against another rude outburst and nodded. His fear was filling him up, thrumming in his veins louder than his own pulse. He had to keep himself alive. If he let the man kill him, then the monster won.

Will ate his dinner in silence. Being what the man wanted him to be. For now.

Chapter End Notes

puts them in my mouth and chews on them like a child with polly pocket clothes

10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will rubbed at his arms as he stepped up the walk to Lecter's house. It was large, and the entryway was open. Will was glad of that. There were too many houses with front doors like cave entrances. He hoped it was an indication of what he could expect once he was inside.

Lecter answered the door, already in an apron with his shirtsleeves rolled up. The sight was slightly jarring to Will, who had never seen him appear so casual. Lecter smiled and gestured for Will to step inside. He moved well out of the way, ever conscious of Will's stressors.

"Please, come in, Will," Lecter said as Will hesitantly did just that, "I'm so pleased you could come."

Will offered a nervous smile, looking around and finding the house surprisingly open and spacious. The light was a bit low, but he didn't feel suffocated. Honestly, it was like those large manor houses his dad had sometimes pointed out to show Will that not everyone lived in temporary shacks.

"Here goes nothing," he said, huffing a nervous laugh at himself.

Lecter led the way through the house to the kitchen. It was large and bright, making Will's chest loosen a bit. It was nothing like the place he had been held. It was clean and bright and warm.

"Do you have any specific preferences when it comes to your food?" Lecter asked, moving behind the counter and cutting into a piece of meat.

Will considered it. He knew Lecter wasn't just asking about allergies. He was also asking if Will had any trauma linked to food, or something more general, like texture or taste based aversions. He had been considerate enough to phrase it so Will wouldn't have to specify which of those he was saying.

"I'll eat just about anything," he said, "and I bet whatever you're making is better than anything I could make for myself. I've never been an adventurous cook."

Lecter smiled and nodded, continuing with his preparations.

"Please, have a seat," he said, gesturing to a few barstools at the island, "would you like some wine?"

Will shuffled over, feeling out of place in such a clean and neat place. He was almost afraid to touch anything, feeling like he would leave fingerprints. He swallowed, trying to calm down a bit more. This was a different anxiety than he normally felt. He didn't feel trapped, but he just wasn't used to this kind of social interaction.

“Sure,” he said, “but, as you might have guessed, I’m not very familiar with wines either. You don’t have to waste your good stuff on me. I wouldn’t be able to tell.”

Lecter looked up at Will with that warm expression, amused. That was good, at least. Lecter wasn’t annoyed by Will being unfamiliar with this kind of thing.

“I wouldn’t do you the disservice of offering you anything I would not want for myself,” Lecter said, pouring two glasses and sliding one toward Will, “and there is no way to become familiar without exposure.”

Will huffed a soft laugh, feeling soothed by Lecter’s easy way of speaking. He seemed just so comfortable in his own skin. Will envied that. He remembered when he had felt that way, as a child. He knew the exact moment that had stopped being an option for him. It had been taken from him.

“Thank you,” Will said, pressing the pads of his fingers to the base of the wineglass.

Lecter didn’t answer, perhaps to encourage Will to elaborate or explain himself. After a moment, Will did.

“You’re treating me like a person,” Will said, staring at the red liquid as it shone, “you don’t try to push me or make me uncomfortable, but you don’t act like everything you do has to be careful either. You don’t treat me like glass, or a grenade. Thank you.”

Lecter’s response was a bright and warm smile, making Will feel like maybe he could do this. He could have a friend. Even just one. He could be here, and talk to Lecter, and eat dinner with him. He could do these things, because Lecter actually wanted Will to be there. And Will wanted to be there.

“You are welcome, Will,” Lecter said, “though I fear your standards for how you should be treated are far too low. That is something we will work on, if you are amenable. You should not be satisfied to be treated poorly.”

Will smiled and nodded, though he didn’t really feel very strongly about that. He was fine being mostly ignored, if he could manage that. He didn’t mind the place he sat in the world, being helpful but unnoticed. He didn’t mind that people didn’t try to get close to him. He didn’t mind being alone most of the time. He didn’t mind being overlooked or underestimated. He didn’t mind any of that.

But it was nice to be around Lecter, who did none of those things.

For a while, Will just sat in silence as Lecter cooked. It was entrancing, watching his hands move so smoothly and confidently between tasks, creating something that looked and smelled absolutely divine. It was nice to have the silence, too, because he didn’t feel like he had to say anything. Lecter wasn’t asking him questions, wasn’t pressing him for conversation, and didn’t seem to expect anything of him other than his presence.

Soon, though, Lecter had two plates finished, and he bid Will follow him to the dining room.

In the doorway to the dining room, Will hesitated.

The lights were low, and there was a large set of glass doors to the back yard. The table and chairs were dark wood, and the entire room had a feeling of a cave. It was dark and unwelcoming.

Lecter noticed Will's reluctance to enter and also stopped, plates in hand.

"Is something the matter, Will?" Lecter asked.

Will felt his chest grow tight, and he focused on taking deep breaths. He repeated to himself that he was safe, that Lecter was safe, and nothing was going to put him in danger. It only helped to stave off the panic, not defeat it.

"Could- I mean, would it- would it be alright if we eat in the kitchen?" Will asked, slightly breathless as his chest tightened further when he tried to take a step into the dining room. He didn't want to be rude. But he didn't think he could go in there. "Please?"

Lecter's brow furrowed slightly with concern, his eyes quickly scanning over Will and taking note of every sign of distress.

"Of course," he said, turning toward the door but not taking a step towards Will.

Will retreated back to the kitchen, bright and open. The large, well lit room that felt so safe. His chest loosened a bit, and he stepped away from the door so Lecter could walk through without coming too near to him. Lecter immediately made his way to the table in the corner of the room and set down the plates. He set them across from each other, and Will was glad.

Will walked over, tense and trembling slightly but counting his breaths and doing everything he could to calm himself down.

Lecter waited until Will sat down to take his own seat, not asking what had triggered the reaction or otherwise demanding an explanation from Will. Will almost felt like crying, feeling ashamed and grateful to the man. He had wanted to just be normal for the evening. Just for tonight, he had wanted to be normal. Just once.

But Lecter wasn't upset with him for making them eat in the kitchen, even though it was clear he preferred the formality of the dining room.

Will hunched over his plate and began to poke at the food, not feeling like he could eat now that he had ruined the evening already. He waited for Lecter to say something.

"Tonight, I have made tenderloin of beef in a tent for two," Lecter said casually, as if nothing at all was wrong or out of the ordinary, "a relatively light and simple dinner, though I feel it presents very well."

Will looked up at Lecter, biting the inside of his cheek. He couldn't believe how normal Lecter managed to act when Will was ruining everything. Anyone else would have run out of patience by now.

“It looks amazing,” Will managed, and felt his chest loosen a bit more as he responded to Lecter’s casual relaxation.

Lecter nodded his thanks, cutting a bite of the meat.

Will took a deep breath and decided to fake it till he could make it, if just for the evening. He cut his own bite of the food and lifted it to his lips.

As expected, it tasted divine, and Will felt his stomach rejoice at the introduction of real food. He hadn’t eaten properly that day. It was frequently a struggle to put food into his body, though he didn’t starve himself. He just forgot.

“It’s delicious, of course,” Will said, huffing a soft laugh as he felt his muscles start to loosen as well. This might still work. “And I’m sorry about having to eat in here.”

Lecter smiled.

“Not at all,” he said, “I have a table here for this very reason, and I find it is more intimate, especially when it is only a meal shared by two friends. As I said before, I want all my guests to be comfortable in my home. If there is anything I can do to make you so, all you need do is ask.”

Will couldn’t believe Lecter was a real person. He somehow managed to be too perfect, while at the same time feeling more solid and tangible than anyone else Will had ever met. He felt within reach.

“So, if you’re not doing all of this just to make Jack happy, why are you doing it?” Will asked.

He wasn’t sure he wanted to know, but he felt as though he needed to. People didn’t spontaneously start treating him like a regular person. There was always a reason, and more often than not that reason was they felt sorry for him and thought they could fix whatever was wrong with him.

He needed to hear that wasn’t Lecter’s reason. Or, he needed to know that Lecter wasn’t as good as he seemed.

“I enjoy your company and find conversation with you uniquely stimulating,” Lecter said easily, without even pausing to think first, “I consider you a friend, and hope you think the same of me. I enjoy making you smile.”

Will felt heat rise quickly into his face, and his heart skipped a beat. All at once, he felt something click into place, and he thought he might be halfway in love with Doctor Lecter.

That wasn’t good.

Will didn’t think he’d be able to say anything without making a fool of himself, so he just nodded and took another bite of his food. Lecter didn’t demand a response from him, but Will had known he wouldn’t.

Chapter End Notes

Hannibal, being a good friend and therapist? More likely than you think.

It's going to be such a fun and easy ride for these two /jk

11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“He’s a pharmacist. The victims all disappeared after picking up their prescriptions from locations he was working at. We’re going to pick him up.”

Will nodded, swallowing past his discomfort as Jack shifted closer, already too close.

He couldn’t be there when they did it. Not in person. That wouldn’t work with the agreement he had convinced Jack into. It wasn’t safe.

“I want you to be patched in. If anything goes wrong, I want you to be on it,” Jack said, “I’ll tell you everything that’s happening. Do you think that will work?”

Will considered it for a moment, wondering what Lecter would have to say about it if he were there.

“That should be fine, Jack,” he said, “are you going now?”

They were. Beverly Katz set Will up with a headset so he could hear Jack, and they went to get Eldon Stammets.

Will listened as they approached the counter, called for Eldon, and found he wasn’t there.

“Is his car there?” Will asked.

“What was that, Will?” Jack asked, and Will could picture him putting a finger to his earpiece like a spy in a cheap movie.

“His car,” Will repeated, pacing quickly from one end of the lab to the other, “Is his car in the parking lot?”

Will heard Jack shouting, repeating the request, directed at the other pharmacy workers, presumably. There was a moment of confusion, then a flurry of activity. Will heard the change as they left the building and went out into the night.

“Check his trunk, Jack,” Will said, “If he has someone, that woman you said went missing, she might be in there.”

Glass shattered, probably a window of the car. Then, calls for an ambulance. She was there, and she was alive.

Will heard a muffled voice, he thought it was Price.

“Am I gonna wanna hear this?” Jack asked.

A response, and Jack was moving again. Will was pacing furiously, feeling simultaneously overstimulated and understimulated by what was going on. He could picture what was happening with startling vibrancy, but he was in an empty and silent lab.

“His browser history,” Jack said, letting Will know what was happening, “Jimmy says I’m not going to be happy.”

Once Jack was inside again, Will was able to hear what other people said a bit better. He closed his eyes to focus.

“Freddie Lounds. Tattlecrime. She published an article about Will.”

Will’s heart sank, and he felt his chest tighten. He left the labs, needing to be somewhere else.

He listened as they read it aloud, catching bits and pieces of what had been written. Someone had told her too much about him. He didn’t even know who could have known it all. Only so much of it could have been her guessing and filling in the blanks.

She knew about what had happened to him. She knew what he was doing, what he could do, and she knew about Hobbs. How did she know?

“Will, I’m going to get her for this. Don’t worry. I’ll stop her.”

Jack’s voice was making empty promises in his ears, possibly because he could hear how labored Will’s breathing had become. They both knew he wouldn’t be able to do much.

Will tore off the headset and disconnected it, stepping out into the cool night air and pulling out his phone. He hoped Lecter would answer.

“Will,” Lecter’s voice was warm and welcome in his ear, “to what do I owe the pleasure?

Will gasped, trying to get enough breath to answer.

“Freddie Lounds. An article. About me. The gardener. He got away.”

Will’s words were stilted and broken, fractured thoughts escaping between short gasps for air. He felt like he was dying. His chest was shrinking, pushing all the air out of his lungs and squeezing his heart.

“Will, listen to me,” Lecter said, his tone calm but serious, “Close your eyes and remember Cassie Boyle.”

Will closed his eyes and tried. He remembered the sound of the crows as they were startled off of the body in the field, their caws, and wings flapping.

My little bird.

“Picture your chest, open and empty. Imagine your lungs have been taken from you, Will.”

Will tried, wheezing and leaning against a wall as he tried to breathe. He could smell the phantom scent of chloroform, like rotting fruit.

He pictured his lungs being pulled from his chest by a pair of sure and steady hands, the blue nitrile gloves smeared with his blood.

All at once, he pulled in a deep breath, and his head slowed from its spinning. He pulled in a few more breaths, one hand on his chest and feeling the panicked beating of his heart behind his ribs.

“Good, Will,” Lecter said, the phone still pressed to Will’s ear, “where are you? Are you somewhere safe?”

Will nodded, then remembered Lecter couldn’t see him.

“I’m at the labs. I didn’t go with them, but I was listening to the entire thing.”

“That’s good, Will,” Lecter said, his tone as calm and soothing as possible, “Tell me what happened.”

Will did. He explained how someone must have talked to Freddie Lounds, and she had published an article about him. He told Lecter that she had found out about his past, and had conjectured that it was the reason he was able to understand killers the way he did, and now people would read it and believe it was true. He explained that the killer had gotten away because of it.

When Will finished, Lecter was silent for a long moment. Will was beginning to wonder if he was still there when Lecter spoke again.

“That should not have happened to you, Will,” he said, “I hope Jack can identify who is at fault.”

Will huffed a laugh, wiping a stray tear from his eye.

“It doesn’t matter,” he said bitterly, “The damage is done. We’ll find our guy again soon enough. We know his address and have his car. He won’t get far.”

“Will,” Lecter said, and the way he said his name made Will want to cry. It was gentle and affectionate. “Would you like me to come to you?”

Will bit his tongue against the urge to say yes. It would be rude to pull Lecter away from his home at this hour. It had been rude to call him in the first place, but Will hadn’t stopped to think about it.

“You don’t have to do that,” Will said, “I’m doing better. Sorry for calling you so late. I hope I didn’t wake you up.”

“Never apologize for coming to me,” Lecter chided gently, “Office hours are for patients. You are my friend.”

Will smiled to himself, a strange and unfamiliar ache settling in his chest. It wasn't altogether unpleasant, but it was strange.

"Thank you," he said, closing his eyes and leaning his head back against the wall.

"My pleasure," Lecter replied.

—

Will measured out portions of the dog food into each of the bowls. Most of the dogs were out in the yard, able to come and go through the open door as they wanted.

Winston was the only one who was lingering behind. He sat in the kitchen doorway and watched Will work.

"If I didn't know better, I'd say you're trying to get first dibs on everyone's food," Will said, and Winston's tail wagged at the sound of his voice.

Honestly, Will did know better. Winston had only tried to take food from the other dogs once, and had been perfectly behaved since then. It was like Winston had a better understanding of these things than other dogs, who mostly only responded to training that took a long time.

Winston was just content to watch Will work.

Will smiled, remembering how he had sat in silence and watched Lecter cook. He wondered if this was how Lecter had seen him, in that time. It was funny, imagining himself as the dog waiting for attention.

You are more like a wolf raised as a pet. You will come into your own.

Will frowned. He still wasn't sure what to make of that. He didn't think it really fit, but he thought Lecter had meant it honestly in that moment.

"Did he see what a wild thing I could be?" Will wondered aloud, remembering the feeling of his captor's flesh parting between his teeth and the taste of his blood.

Winston made a soft grumbling sound, like he was trying to answer. Will smiled and finished dishing up food, calling in the rest of the dogs. They all set in to eat, and Will watched to be sure no one stole from the others. Will's phone rang, and he saw it was Jack. With a sigh, he answered.

"What's up, Jack?" he asked.

"Stammets got to Lounds. He was asking about you. I think you might be in danger."

Will felt himself go tense, but his breathing was fine.

"He wants connection," Will said, nodding to himself, "he thinks I can understand him. I don't think he'll try to hurt me, Jack, but he's going to want to make contact."

“What kind of contact?” Jack asked, “Should I send someone to your house?”

Will felt a spike of panic at the thought, but pushed past it.

“No. At least not yet. I’ll come in to Quantico, so you can be sure I’m alright. Give me a minute to settle the dogs and drive there.”

Jack agreed, and the call ended. Will was already pressing call for Doctor Lecter when he got to the front door to shut it.

The line rang, and rang. Eventually, Will was sent to voicemail, and he frowned. It was strange for Lecter to not answer.

Will grabbed his keys and his jacket, and dialed again.

Will was sent to voicemail for the third time in the car on his way to Quantico, and he impulsively changed direction. He headed into Baltimore, calling Lecter again.

He was probably worried over nothing. Lecter was probably fine, but busy with a patient. That made more sense than something having happened to him.

But Eldon Stammets would try to reach Will, and Will thought he would try to do something for him. Eldon would try to do something nice for Will, to convince him to see things the way he did.

What would be nicer than finding Lecter in a field, becoming mushrooms that could reach for him, and connect with him? What would bring him more peace?

Again, Will had accidentally put Lecter in danger. It was his responsibility to fix it.

Will pulled up to Lecter’s office and saw the man’s Bentley parked outside as usual. That was good, because it meant he should be here.

Will raced into the office, his hand on his gun. But it was empty. No one was there.

Will closed his eyes and tried to think. Lecter wasn’t diabetic, so how would Eldon subdue him?

The smell hit him, and Will’s eyes flew open in a panic. It was like rotting fruit. It was so uncomfortably familiar to him, and he felt his heart beating in his chest again.

Chloroform.

Will’s heart beat hard against his ribs, and he imagined Lecter asphyxiating on vomit, or having a bad reaction and dying that way. He tried not to picture the chemical burns on Lecter’s face, or the other ways it could hurt him.

Will needed to call Jack and tell him what was going on. He should have done it already.

Where would Eldon take Lecter?

Will ran right back out of the office.

Chapter End Notes

So much fun!~ Just some good, easy, fluffy times. No need to be worried at all.~ (lie)
Ah, I'm so excited for next chapter. That is a warning.

12

Chapter Summary

Eldon learns that being understood has a downside. Hannibal learns that a little fear can be a good thing.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will stepped quietly through the woods, listening for anything. He had learned as a kid how to be nearly silent in the woods, and now it was turning out to be useful.

These woods were near Will's house, but not the ones directly behind it. This was where he thought Eldon would take Lecter.

Because it was a gift for him.

Will's phone vibrated in his pocket. He had already turned off the ringtone so it wouldn't give him away if he found Eldon. He saw it was Jack, and knew he was going to be in trouble for this. He didn't answer.

Jack had been expecting him, and Will had disappeared.

That meant men were on their way already, coming in this direction. Will knew they would find him, would see his car parked on the side of the road by the head of this little trail. He knew that. But they might not be in time. That was why he had to go in first. It was his responsibility to make sure Lecter survived this day.

Will heard a sound and froze, his head cocking in the same way a fox or deer would when they heard the hunter coming. He listened, holding his breath and more intensely focused than he had been in some time.

It came again, and Will knew what it was at once. It was the sound of a shovel sinking into dirt.

Will unholstered his gun and stalked slowly in the direction of the sound. As he came closer, Will was able to hear labored breathing. He felt a cold trickle of dread down his spine, knowing exactly what Eldon Stammets would be doing with a shovel out here. He really didn't have much time.

Will caught sight of a man through the trees, and began working on keeping himself hidden. He hadn't been shown a picture of Stammets, but it would be easy enough to confirm it was him.

The man with the shovel was sweating heavily, his shirt sticking to him in dark patches. There was a gun tucked into the back of his pants, the way criminals did on television. Will wondered if that was where he had learned it. As Will got closer, he could see the frameless glasses sliding down his nose and being pushed back up mechanically, unheeding of the smear of dirt the action left on his nose.

When Will caught sight of Lecter, his breath caught in his throat and he froze in place.

He hadn't been entirely stripped down as the others had been, yet, but he was without his jacket or vest. He had been laid on the ground under a tree, looking vulnerable and helpless. Will couldn't tell if he was even still alive. That scared Will more than anything else in that moment.

Will stepped out into the clearing, leveling his gun at Stammets and flicking the safety off.

"Eldon Stammets?" he asked, startling the man and getting his attention.

The man's watery eyes turned on Will, his appearance pathetic with the smear of dirt on his nose making him look almost stupid. It would have been funny in any other circumstance.

"You're Will Graham," he said, "Freddie Lounds said you understand me."

Will swallowed. He was nervous, but his hands were steady.

"I'm not going to let you bury Doctor Lecter," he said, "You don't have to do it. He's not a part of this."

Eldon furrowed his brow and looked at Lecter.

"You don't understand all of it," he said mournfully, "but you could. If you let me bury him. He could reach for you, the same way you're reaching for him."

Eldon reached for the gun he had tucked into his pants, and Will fired. His bullet hit Eldon in the shoulder and the man went sprawling back on the dirt. He was panting hard, and he was still trying to get to the gun with his other hand.

Will stepped towards him and fired again.

Eldon cried out as another bullet hit him, this time in the chest, but it wasn't killing him. At least not quickly.

Will grabbed the bloody front of Eldon's shirt and pulled him up, getting the gun away from him and tossing it away. He felt as if he had just been given a shot of adrenaline, and he was thrumming with power and energy.

"I thought you understood me," Eldon gurgled, his body going limp.

Will dropped him back to the ground, both his hands bloody from the contact.

"I don't," he said.

Will turned and ran over to Lecter, shoving his gun back into the holster and praying Lecter was alright. He fell to his knees beside the unmoving body, desperate to save him.

Will lifted Lecter's hand and felt his wrist for a pulse, and was relieved to find one. He was alright. Alive, at least. There were some burns on Lecter's face, and Will felt his eyes sting with tears.

This was his fault.

The hand Will was holding twitched, and Lecter's eyes opened. There was a moment of confusion in his gaze, then it cleared and he looked at Will.

"Will?" Lecter said, his voice rough and raw from the chemicals.

Will suddenly realized he was touching the man and started to pull away reflexively. But Lecter gripped Will's hand tightly.

"Please," Lecter rasped, "don't leave me."

Will let out a breath, relieved Lecter wasn't dead, but confused and overwhelmed by everything that had just happened. He felt like an exposed nerve.

"Doctor Lecter, I'm sorry," he said, "It's my fault."

Will could hear voices and sirens, men coming through the woods towards them. Jack had found them.

"I think you can call me Hannibal, at this point, Will," Lecter said with a small smile, "and you have saved my life. Do not feel sorry for that."

Will huffed a laugh through the tears that were streaming down his face. Even now, when he had almost died, Lecter was worried about how Will was handling it.

"Alright, Hannibal," he said, and Hannibal squeezed his hand gently.

Then, there were people everywhere, and Will handed Hannibal off to the paramedics. He explained what had happened in fractured sentences, rubbing at his arm and trying to keep his panic at bay.

When Jack finally showed himself, he ushered everyone away from Will and offered to take him to the hospital where they had taken Hannibal.

Will agreed, and was glad to be getting away from Eldon Stammets, who might not survive his injuries. He wasn't sure how he felt about that, or rather, he was afraid of how he felt and was trying not to think about it.

—

Hannibal was allowed to go, after a thorough examination, and Will offered to drive him to his office so he could get his car.

Hannibal smiled tiredly and shook his head.

“If it is not too much trouble, would you please bring me to my home? I am quite tired. I can ask someone to fetch my car for me.”

Will nodded at once. Hannibal had also been thoroughly roughed up while unconscious. Eldon hadn’t been too gentle with him.

“Of course. Anything you need,” he said.

Hannibal smiled.

“You need not do anything for me out of guilt, Will,” he chided, “the only person responsible for what happened is Eldon Stammets.”

“And Freddie Lounds,” Will corrected with his own, small smile.

Hannibal huffed a soft laugh. He looked fine, now, despite the burns on his face and his skin being just a bit paler than usual. The strangest thing about his appearance was his lack of jacket and vest.

Will made a mental note to make sure they got those back to him.

“I suppose Miss Lounds has earned a share of the blame,” Hannibal agreed, “but you have not. You are the reason that young woman and I are both alive now.”

Will didn’t argue, though he didn’t entirely agree. He was horrified with himself, because a part of him couldn’t help but think it would have been beautiful to find Hannibal in a field, becoming mushrooms that would react and reach at Will’s presence. It would have been so peaceful. Will couldn’t help but feel it could have been lovely.

“How are you feeling?” Will asked, holding the car door open for him.

Hannibal sighed softly as he sat down into the car.

“You are correct. Chloroform is not nearly as neat and clean as people expect.”

Will smiled and rounded the car.

“I hope that’s the last time either of us has to deal with it,” he said as he started the car.

Hannibal nodded.

Once they were at Hannibal’s house, Will went with him inside to be sure he had everything he needed.

“If you would be so kind,” Hannibal said, “would you make some tea? My head is aching, and my throat is quite sore.”

Will agreed immediately. Hannibal sat down at the kitchen table and directed Will to where he kept the tea and teacups.

It was strange, the way their positions had flipped. Will wasn't familiar with Hannibal's kitchen, but he wasn't uncomfortable there either. Hannibal's gaze was not so intrusive and intense as most, and his presence was more of a balm than an irritant.

Will's hands trembled a bit as he poured the tea, but he didn't spill any of it. He handed the cup to Hannibal, and their fingers brushed.

So far, he hadn't gone back to being completely averse to Hannibal's touch.

"Will, would you stay with me for a while?" Hannibal asked, "I don't quite want to be alone yet."

Will nodded and sat at the table across from him, twisting and wringing his hands together.

They sat in silence for a moment as Hannibal sipped his tea and Will worried. He worried about what would happen next. He worried about what he knew he should do.

"I should probably stop coming to sessions with you," he said, biting the inside of his cheek.

Hannibal frowned.

"Why?" he asked.

Will spread his hands, not sure exactly how to explain it.

"This is the second time you've been in danger because you're connected to me. This time, you were specifically targeted because of me. And it's only the second case I've worked since we met."

Will started running the nail of his thumb under his bottom lip, scraping at the skin.

"I was afraid I wouldn't be able to save you," Will said at length, staring down at the table.

Slowly, Hannibal's hand reached out, letting Will see and anticipate the touch. To let Will pull away or show his distress in any way. Will stilled, but didn't tense or pull away.

Hannibal took Will's hand, pulling it away from where he was worrying the patch of skin on his lip. He just held Will's hand for a moment, smiling softly.

"You deserve to have something in your life that is safe for you, Will," Hannibal said gently, "If you honestly tell me I am not helping you, then I will accept it and let you go. You do not have to be alone in that darkness."

Will swallowed past a lump in his throat. The feeling of Hannibal's skin against his own, warm and real, was nice. He had forgotten it could be nice to be touched by another person. He had forgotten he could touch someone without something bad happening.

“I feel like I’ve dragged you into my world,” Will said, his voice unsteady.

Hannibal shook his head.

“I got here on my own, but I would appreciate your company.”

Will sighed and curled his fingers into Hannibal’s for a moment.

“Alright. But you have to be careful.”

Hannibal agreed that he would be.

Chapter End Notes

Is that? Could it be? Progress? A little improvement? Will is actually getting better? ;)

13

Chapter Notes

Will can have a small mental breakdown. As a treat.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will got home and collapsed against the door, sliding to the floor and hugging himself. He began to sob, and all the dogs crowded to him, concerned.

He was completely overwhelmed by what had happened that day. He had been thrown back and forth between nearly paralyzed with fear and entirely filled with power and pleasure. He had been afraid Hannibal would die, then sickly delighted as he shot and defeated Eldon Stammets. He had been afraid of letting Hannibal go, then drowned in relief and gratitude when Hannibal refused to let him.

Will pressed his face to his knees, mirroring that younger, more helpless version of himself. The one that hadn't known the way a body slumped and became heavier when the life left it completely. The version of himself that hadn't known how hard he would have to bite to cut through human flesh. The version of himself that hadn't known he liked it.

The version of himself that had been beating his wings against the bars of his cage.

The version of himself that had been innocent, but dying.

—

Will crawled up the stairs out of the basement. He knew his ankle was broken, but it didn't look too bad. It wasn't crooked, just swelling and painful.

The door was unlocked, just as he had expected it to be. He pushed it open and found himself on the floor of a kitchen. It was an ugly checkerboard pattern of formica tile, and Will could feel a layer of grit under his palms as he pulled himself along.

There was a phone on the counter, sitting beside a toaster and a jar of honey. He wouldn't be able to reach it from the floor.

Will saw a metal folding chair, leaning against the wall and just visible around the corner. He thought he could use that.

Will managed to set the chair up by the counter, then heaved himself up into it. He jarred his ankle and yelped in pain, but gritted his teeth to keep himself from passing out.

Will finally got the phone in hand and dialed a number he had memorized a while back. He didn't know how long it had been.

"Hello?" The voice was that of a woman. Not who he was looking for.

"Is officer Lirette there?" Will asked.

"One moment," the woman said, and Will heard her call for someone.

"This is Lirette, who am I speaking with?"

Will held back a groan of pain as his ankle throbbed.

"Will Graham," he said, "You might not remember me. You gave me your card a while ago, when you stopped those guys from beating me up."

There was a moment of silence, then a sharp inhale.

"Will. You've been missing. Where are you?" Lirette asked.

Will huffed a laugh, his body slumping in exhaustion. He didn't think he'd be able to hold on much longer.

"I don't know," he said, "I just got out of the basement. I don't know his name. Can you trace the call?"

There was a flurry of activity on the other end, Lirette snapping orders out and spurring them into motion.

"We're on our way, Will," Lirette said, "stay with me. Are you hurt?"

Will shifted, hissing when the movement agitated his ankle yet again.

"Broken ankle," he said, "It's not too bad. I might have some scratches and scrapes too, but I'm mostly fine."

"Okay, Will. That's good. Is the man who did this still there? Are you in danger?"

"He's in the basement," Will said, "I think he's dead. I think I killed him."

Lirette muttered a curse under his breath in Cajun French, possibly not realizing Will would know what he was saying. Maybe not caring.

"Okay. Stay with me, Will."

Will huffed.

"You keep saying that, but where else would I go?" he asked, his eyelids growing heavy. The phone felt heavy, too. It wasn't supposed to be that heavy.

Lirette said something else, but it sounded far away. Will closed his eyes and felt the phone slip from his hand. It tapped on the soft laminate flooring, but he didn't hear it.

—

"Will Graham. Long time since I heard from you last. How are you?"

Will smiled, a little sadly. Lirette sounded old and frail now. He *was* those things. It hurt Will to hear it, though. The hero of his youth wasn't supposed to get old. That was most of the reason he hadn't called in a while. It hurt to hear his voice.

"I'm alright," Will said, "but there's a reporter making trouble for me. No one's come asking, have they?"

Lirette coughed. It was the cough of a lifelong smoker. It was a miracle he didn't have lung cancer.

"No," Lirette said when he caught his breath, "and I wouldn't say anything if they did. I'd knock their teeth out first."

Will laughed softly, knowing Lirette's fighting days were long over. They had ended when he'd been hit by a car that pounded his entire left leg into pulp.

"I know," Will said, "I just can't figure out where she heard all the things she said."

Lirette coughed again, and Will heard a nurse offer him a glass of water.

"I saw your name in the news," Lirette said, "you're catching serial killers now. Makes me proud. You're doing more good than I ever did."

Will closed his eyes.

"All I do is for and because of you," he said, "I owe you my life, so you can count all these as yours, too."

Lirette chuckled.

"You saved yourself, boy, but being able to help you is the proudest moment of my career. I'm glad you called."

Will nodded to himself.

"Me too."

"So, how are you really doing? Do you still dream of it? Are you talking to anyone?"

Will swallowed and brushed his finger over one of the lures sitting on his desk.

"I still dream. Almost every night. But I think it's getting better," he answered.

When Lirette spoke again, there was a smile in his voice.

“You found someone. I can tell. A therapist or a girlfriend?”

Will huffed another laugh.

“Just a friend,” he said, “but he can understand me more than most people.”

Lirette hummed.

“Well, don’t let him go, in that case. You take your happiness by the reins, and don’t you let it go. You deserve to be happy, boy.”

“Okay,” Will said, “I will.”

They talked for a while longer, until Lirette got too tired and had to go. Will promised to call again soon, and then he was alone again.

Winston walked up and set his head in Will’s lap. Will stroked him for a while, letting the conversation flow through his mind and live in the stream.

He hadn’t really thought Lirette would have told anyone. He hadn’t even told Will’s dad all the details. Monty Graham had died without knowing what his son had been through. That had been what Will had wanted. He hadn’t wanted his dad to know. Monty had felt guilty enough as it was, having not been able to protect Will in the first place.

It did leave Will feeling unhappy, because it was looking more and more likely that someone in the FBI had talked to Freddie. Someone who could have looked up his records when they became curious.

Will saw the moment Winston’s ears perked up, and he was at attention. Glancing at the other dogs, he saw they were all turned towards the door.

Someone was coming.

When Will heard the car on the gravel drive, the dogs began to growl and grow restless.

Will stood and looked out the window. The sight of the familiar Bentley caused a strange, roiling confusion of emotions in his chest. He was happy to see Hannibal, as strange as that was for him to realize, but he had never invited anyone to his house for a reason. It was his one safe place. His sanctuary. The presence of anyone else would taint it, or else feel like an intrusion or attack on him.

Will thought Hannibal would understand that, and accept it. But Will didn’t want to turn him away after he’d made the drive out here. That would be rude.

Will hushed the dogs as he saw Hannibal step out of the car with a familiar bag in hand. He opened the door and let them out, standing in the doorway where Hannibal could see him.

Hannibal smiled at the dogs as they crowded around him, offering his hand for inspection. The dogs each took a turn sniffing him to be sure he wasn’t a threat before circling back and sitting by Will’s feet on the porch.

Winston didn’t sit, though, standing at attention between Will and the perceived stranger.

“Your pack are loyal and protective,” Hannibal said with a smile, “I see I do not have to worry you are in danger here.”

Will nodded. Hannibal was standing at the bottom step, not coming onto the porch yet. Will knew he wouldn’t unless he was invited.

“Other shrinks think I use my dogs to compensate for my lack of human connection,” he said, smiling wryly, “care to share your thoughts?”

Hannibal smiled. Will could still see the marks from the burns the chloroform had given him, but they were fading. Healing with time, as everyone had told him he would do as well.

“I think it is quite logical and apt of you to have them, without even considering the emotional value of canine companions,” he said, “they are more likely to keep you safe than any installed security system.”

Will huffed a laugh.

“My thoughts exactly,” he said.

Hannibal nodded, then lifted his bag slightly.

“I have prepared lunch for us. Would you like to sit out here while we eat?” he asked.

Will grinned, realizing he could do that. Hannibal was once more offering an option that wouldn’t trigger an attack in Will.

“Sure. I’ll just grab another chair, and a table,” he said, “Um, I’ll just be a second.”

Hannibal nodded and stepped onto the porch as Will headed back inside. Will had a moment of concern, thinking that he had never had anyone even up to his front porch before. He guarded his one safe place fiercely.

But it was alright. Hannibal didn’t have to come in, and he was safe anyway. Hannibal respected Will’s boundaries, and didn’t hurt him like others did.

Chapter End Notes

And an ongoing crisis, to marinate.

How are we liking Lirette? He's going to be showing up here and there. I like him. Someone for Will to connect with, and have as a foundation for his current mental state.

14

Chapter Summary

Porch dinner date. Very cute and all that. Emotional vulnerability.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will came back out with a chair and a folding card table to see the dogs gathered around Hannibal like a small congregation. All but Winston, who sat guarding the chair Will usually sat in.

“I’m sorry about that,” Will said quickly, setting up the table and positioning the chair for Hannibal, “I didn’t realize Winston wouldn’t let you sit.”

Hannibal smiled and accepted the offered seat.

“No need to apologize,” he said as he began to pull items from his bag, “I am pleased to see you have such a loyal companion.”

Will smiled awkwardly as he sat, wondering if he should offer something to drink. He didn’t know what would be appropriate, being completely unversed in this kind of social interaction. When Hannibal pulled a pair of glasses from the bag along with a bottle, Will relaxed a bit.

“I hope you are up for trying something new,” Hannibal said casually, managing to put Will more at ease with his demeanor, “this drink is popular where I am from, and I think it is appropriately refreshing for a warm day such as this.”

Will was curious, and surprised when Hannibal poured a liquid that was bright pink into each of the glasses. He was interested in what it was, and the fact that Hannibal was offering a glimpse into his own past like this. Will hadn’t learned much about his past, though he had made a few small guesses regarding it. Hannibal was hard to read, and didn’t talk about his past.

Hannibal slid a glass to Will and began serving food onto plates. Will lifted the glass and inhaled, curious about what he should expect from the drink.

It smelled like fruit, sweet and fresh.

With Hannibal’s eyes on him, Will tentatively took a sip. It was sweet as well as tart, and certainly tasted pink.

Will hummed in consideration, and Hannibal smiled as he passed a plate over the table to him.

“It is called cranberry pap,” Hannibal said, “sweet and cool.”

Will nodded.

“It’s good,” he said, “I almost expected to learn you only drink coffee and wine.”

Hannibal huffed a soft laugh.

“Caffeine and alcohol,” he mused, “how unhealthy of me. Do you suppose many people think that of me?”

Will shrugged and took another drink, getting used to the flavor and using the action to hide a small smile.

“Probably depends,” he said, “Especially if this is the kind of thing you do often.”

Hannibal smiled.

“It is not,” he said, “I think it is likely a fair few people would be surprised to find I drink even coffee.”

Will laughed.

They weren’t separated by more than just a couple feet, but he wasn’t uncomfortable. He wondered if he wouldn’t be distressed if Hannibal touched him again.

“They probably would be,” he said, “You manage to give the impression of something not quite human, if you don’t mind me saying.”

Hannibal tipped his head, watching as Will took a bite of the food.

“In what way might that be?” he asked.

Will glanced up curiously, meeting Hannibal’s eyes. He thought Hannibal knew the answer to his own question. He thought Hannibal did it mostly intentionally. So he wanted to hear it in Will’s words.

Will would have to choose them carefully.

“You’ve crafted an appearance of immaculate order, always neat and precise,” he began slowly, “the parts of yourself that you show people are carefully selected in order to show only the very best of yourself. At least, what others are likely to consider the best. I’ve never met anyone who can hide their imperfections as well as you can.”

They ate in silence for a minute or so, Will wondering if he had said something wrong while Hannibal considered what had been said. The dogs milled around in the yard, chasing each

other and any larger bugs they could find. All but Winston, who was laying at Will's feet and watching Hannibal closely.

"Have you seen my imperfections, then?" Hannibal asked, sounding amused, "perhaps I have not hidden them as well as I had hoped."

Will smiled and shook his head.

"I've seen some things you normally hide, but nothing I would consider a flaw, really," he answered, "I saw your fear, after Eldon Stammets, and I've caught sight of your anger and annoyance once or twice. Things you try not to show in order to make people comfortable around you."

Hannibal nodded thoughtfully, his expression still amused and pleasant.

"Perhaps you have already guessed as much, but I also do not often speak about my past," he said.

Will nodded.

"I thought so. I was surprised by the cranberry pap because of that, but I didn't want to pry."

Hannibal huffed another laugh.

"After all I have convinced you to tell me, I feel you have earned your own chance to pry a bit," he said, almost conspiratorially.

Will hummed, considering that. If it were anyone else, he wouldn't even think about asking anything that could be intrusive or rude. With anyone else, he would be worried how they would react. With anyone else, he would be afraid of seeing too much.

With anyone else, he wouldn't have been there, on his porch and smiling.

"Alright, I'll bite," he said, "I've only been able to narrow it down to the Baltic countries. Care to help me out there?"

Hannibal smiled, and it was warm. Will wanted to live in that smile and the way it made him feel.

"Lithuania," he said, "I am impressed you narrowed it down so well. I should have come to expect it from you, but I still find you unpredictable."

Will felt himself blush, and he looked down at his food. For anyone else, unpredictable wouldn't have been all that significant. It might even have been an insult. But Will thought Hannibal was used to being able to predict everyone he came into contact with.

It was a compliment, from Hannibal.

"So, why'd you leave?" he asked.

Hannibal let out a soft sigh, turning to watch as Buster and Ellie began to wrestle.

“It was not by my choice,” he said, “my parents died, and I was sent to Paris to live with my uncle. I came here to finish medical school.”

Will frowned.

Hannibal sounded justifiably mournful, but there was something else. Will could tell there was something he wasn’t saying. Something behind his grief.

Will wanted to know, but he felt like asking would be rude.

He wondered if Hannibal’s gaze was unguarded just then. If, were Will to meet his eyes now, he might see what he wanted to know. Maybe he could read Hannibal’s past the way the man had always made him read his day.

But Hannibal was still watching the dogs, sun hitting his face and lighting up his eyelashes like fine spider silk.

“How old were you?” Will asked.

He didn’t specify which part of the story he meant. He knew Hannibal would understand.

“Eight,” he said simply.

Will nodded and didn’t ask anything else. Like Hannibal had said during the session after Will had confessed to what had exacerbated his aversion to eye contact, what Hannibal had shared now was enough.

“You know,” Will said nervously, staring down at his food and chewing the inside of his cheek, “checking your pulse was the first time I touched anyone in probably fifteen years.”

Will smiled, the expression wavering as he considered how pathetic that made him sound. It could even have been taken as some sad ploy to initiate some kind of physical contact again. He tried to make it better.

“People touch me sometimes, it’s not possible to completely avoid it, but I do avoid it whenever I can.”

Hannibal looked at Will, his gaze falling heavy and comfortable on Will’s skin.

“You allowed me to touch you,” he noted.

Will nodded. He could remember the gentle way Hannibal had held his hand, stopping his from the small self-harm he had resorted to in his anxiety. It had felt nice, which had surprised him.

“I guess I opened it up by doing it first,” he said, “we both needed some comfort just then. And it was… nice.”

Will pressed his hands against his glass, feeling exposed and vulnerable from the admission. He didn't know what to expect from Hannibal.

"What causes your aversion to touch, Will?" Hannibal asked, "is it fear of being hurt?"

Will closed his eyes tight, images flashing in his vision.

The man, his face shredded and his eyes gone. Blood everywhere while Will clawed at him like a rabid animal.

"No. I'm afraid the people I touch will be hurt," he confessed.

Will felt a sob build in his throat. He had never admitted that, even to himself. He had been content pretending he was afraid of being hurt, the way he had been for so long as a kid. It had made sense, and was normal.

But Will could never be normal.

"Is that why you could not touch Abigail Hobbs, even as she lay dying?" Hannibal asked.

Those words lanced Will through, and the sob escaped. No tears came, but his shoulders began to shake with the silent reaction to his guilt.

"It didn't make a difference," he choked out, "She still died, even though I didn't touch her."

Hannibal reached out and took Will's hand again. Will tried to pull away, but Hannibal held him fast. It was the first time Hannibal did anything against Will's wishes.

"And I am still alive, even though you did," Hannibal said firmly, "You do not have to cause harm. You can choose the context of your touch."

Will froze in place, hearing Hannibal's words but not daring to believe them.

"I can't stop what happens to you, or anyone else," Will whispered, "I couldn't stop Hobbs from killing Abigail, and I couldn't stop Stammets from taking you. I can't control other people. I'm cursed to watch, to see, to understand. But I can never *do* anything."

Hannibal's grip loosened a bit, but Will didn't move.

"No, Will," Hannibal said, "You can. You have. You did. You killed the man who hurt you. You killed the man who took those girls. You killed Eldon Stammets. All of these are actions you took. You did something, and didn't it make you feel alive? Didn't it feel like you were finally yourself?"

Will tensed, his hand clamping down on Hannibal's reflexively. Winston lifted his head and gave a low woof, aware of the shift in the atmosphere.

"How can you know?" he asked, his voice harsh and quiet, "no one ever understands that."

Hannibal smiled and held Will’s hand in both of his own. His hands were large, and covered Will’s completely, though Will’s was not small. His fingers were long, graceful, artistic, and capable. They really were surgeon's hands.

“Actions give you power,” Hannibal said, “and touch gives the world emotional context. Both things have been linked to these moments for you, whether you like it or not.”

Will swallowed hard, meeting Hannibal’s eyes.

Something in Hannibal’s gaze scared him, but also gave him a sense of power. Like he was in danger, but could handle it. He could do something.

Chapter End Notes

Giving Will a single red flag, and he is not picking it up. He's too smitten. Poor boy.

15

“Where do we stand, Will?” Jack asked.

Will stepped away from him, feeling stressed and trapped. Jack seemed concerned, and rightfully so. Will had worked two cases for him, and both had ended in deadly force encounters where Will had faced down a serial killer. He had known Will was vulnerable to trauma, and was now worried he’d been broken.

The fact that he was here, asking, meant there was another case. One he wanted Will’s help on, but didn’t know if he could ask for. Will wondered what kind of case it was.

“I stand on one side of a line, and you’re on the other,” he said, “what do you need?”

Jack wasn’t happy with that. It was clear he wasn’t happy with Will for stepping away, and even less for not being given a clear answer regarding Will’s willingness to help. Will didn’t feel bad about it, because he was tired of Jack trying to get him to promise he’d help without knowing anything about the case.

“I need someone who can help me find some missing boys.”

Will clenched his jaw and shook his head.

He couldn’t do this. Not this time. He was tired and strung out. He was still having nightmares in which he couldn’t save Hannibal, and when he faced Eldon Stammets he met a pair of cold, grey eyes.

Abducted boys. Jack really should have known better. He shouldn’t have even asked.

Hannibal would be angry.

That thought gave Will the courage to speak. The knowledge that he had someone at his back. Someone was on his side for once.

“No, Jack,” he said firmly, “not this one. I’ll have to sit it out. Get someone else to draw up a profile for you.”

Jack wasn’t happy.

“Will. People are being killed. Families. You stopped the last two killers we had. You can stop this one.”

Will bit his tongue hard, wanting to shout at Jack. Berate him for pushing when he knew it could be bad for Will. When Will responded, his voice was low and cold, almost unrecognizable to himself.

“If you want me to stop the next one, the next three or ten, you have to let me sit this *one* out. If you force me to do it, I will quit. Regardless of the outcome of the case.”

Jack was silent. Will had stunned him speechless. Will felt darkly satisfied by that. He didn't enjoy making Jack unhappy, but he knew Hannibal would be even more displeased if he allowed himself to be bullied again.

It was strange to desire someone's approval more than he feared Jack's anger. He didn't fear Hannibal, and knew his anger wouldn't be directed at him, nor would it be loud as Jack's was. Hannibal would be silent and disapproving, but let Will do what he saw fit.

It was strange for that to be such a strong motivator.

"Fine," Jack said, "I'll just ask Doctor Lecter to help."

Will felt a shard of panic spear through him. Hannibal getting involved would put him in danger. If Freddie Lounds said something about him, would the killer fixate on Hannibal the way Eldon Stammets had with Will? What if Jack asked Hannibal to actually go out into the field?

Will set his jaw and clenched his fists. This was just another way Jack was trying to coerce him into helping. The way he had held Will's bag hostage. He was learning how far Jack would go to get his help.

"You can ask him," Will said coldly, not betraying his anxiety, "but I will not help."

Jack huffed and nodded, finally accepting Will's refusal. When he was gone, Will let out a shaky breath and ran a hand through his hair. His hands were trembling and his chest felt tight, but he could still breathe. That was good, at least.

He didn't have time to call Hannibal before his next lecture. He would just have to hope things turned out. He knew Hannibal wouldn't be bullied. He doubted Jack would try.

Will taught his class, only slightly more jumpy than usual, and tried not to catastrophize. Hannibal could take care of himself. He would probably be even more safe if he worked directly with Jack. He would be around people who could keep him safe.

When Will could finally get away, he immediately called Hannibal.

"Will," Hannibal said warmly, "I hope you are not calling to cancel our session today. I have a twenty four hour cancellation policy."

Will smiled, shoving folders into his bag.

"No, that's not it," he said, "has Jack talked to you today?"

Hannibal hummed his agreement.

"He informs me you have refused to work on his current case," he said, "which I wholeheartedly agree with. He told me of the case, and I think it is wise you not become involved. Especially so soon after Eldon Stammets."

Will huffed a soft laugh, pleased to know he had been right, that Hannibal was on his side.

“Did he ask you to help?” Will asked.

“I did not agree to help him coerce you, Will,” Hannibal answered lightly, “but he did ask if I would consult in your stead. How does that make you feel?”

Will laughed bitterly.

“Our session starting early?” he asked, just a bit sharply, “I feel like he’s making me play a game of musical chairs at Damocles’ dinner party.”

Hannibal was amused when he answered.

“An interesting concept,” he said, “I referred him to a colleague of mine. Doctor Bloom specializes in family trauma, and I thought this case to be her area of expertise.”

Will let out a relieved breath, slinging his bag over his shoulder and heading out, switching the lights off in the classroom before shutting the door.

“Good,” he said, “If it’s Alana Bloom, you’re probably right.”

“Have you met?” Hannibal asked, sounding genuinely curious.

Will shook his head, though Hannibal couldn’t see it.

“No, but I’ve read her stuff. She knows what she’s talking about. If Jack likes her, maybe he’ll ease up on me a little,” he said.

Will tossed his bag onto the passenger seat of his car and dropped in behind the wheel.

“Or, he might send her to do what Jack believes I have failed to,” Hannibal mused.

Will grimaced. He could see that happening, unfortunately. Just throw Will at every psychiatrist he could find until one of them could make him come when Jack called.

“Do you think she would do it?” Will asked, pulling out of the parking lot and heading in the direction of Hannibal’s office.

“She may be curious,” Hannibal said thoughtfully, “But I do not believe she will think any more fondly of coercion.”

Will hummed his agreement.

“I’m in the car on my way to you, and I should probably go,” he said, “we can pick this up when I get there.”

“Please, join me for dinner at my home instead,” Hannibal said, “we need not stand on ceremony.”

Will hesitated, but agreed. They weren’t really therapy sessions, anyway. Not anymore. They were just conversations. Conversations between friends.

And, logically, it was probably therapeutic for him to spend time in Hannibal's home. He wasn't strictly comfortable there, but Hannibal was a source of comfort and safety, so it would expose him to things outside of his regular comfort zone and help him to grow and heal.

That didn't make him much less stressed.

But he went. Will drove to Hannibal's house and dithered all the way up the walk to the front door. Several times on his way, he stopped and felt as if he couldn't take another step forward. The house was so big and looming. It was intimidating, even if he didn't have an aversion to strange places and other people.

Eventually, Will made it to the front door and rang the bell, feeling a shudder of anxiety wrack through him.

When Hannibal opened the door, Will smiled nervously, and Hannibal immediately recognized the signs.

"You are having a bad day," Hannibal noted.

Will huffed softly, stepping in when Hannibal moved away from the door to give him room.

"Not the worst day I've ever had, but it hasn't been good," he agreed, "hearing Jack threaten to put you in danger just to get to me seems to have had that effect. I hadn't expected that of him."

Hannibal nodded, shutting the door softly and making Will jump a bit.

"I believe Jack means well," Hannibal said, sounding a bit exasperated, "but he prioritizes his obligation to catch killers over almost all else. He finds it hard to accept that others cannot do the same. It will be good for him to face the truth for a time before you return to his team."

Will scraped his thumb nail under his lip, nodding slightly. That made sense, but didn't make him feel better. He found logic rarely changed anxiety. No matter how much he thought about something, it never made him feel better.

Talking, though. That had seemed to help. At least after he had started talking to Hannibal. Talking *to Hannibal* helped.

"He's a good man. Sometimes, he's too good. Too righteous," Will agreed.

Hannibal gestured for Will to follow him to the kitchen, and Will did. He felt his body relax a bit when he was in the bright, well lit and clean environment of the kitchen. He felt as if this was the room of the house Hannibal was most himself, and he could also be most himself. He was not so nervous here, and seeing Hannibal at his truest form was nice.

"You look tired," Hannibal noted, sliding behind the counter and picking up the knife laying beside a cutting board, "I take it you have not been sleeping well."

Will shook his head. He had been meaning to talk about his dreams with Hannibal. To ask what might be done about them. It had never come up until now.

“I don’t suppose you have advice for nightmares,” he offered wryly, “it’s something I’ve been meaning to ask about.”

Hannibal considered it.

“That is not surprising. Those who suffer from post traumatic stress often experience nightmares and sleep disturbances. This is something we must discuss further.”

Will sighed softly.

He had been afraid of that. He was going to have to talk about the nightmares. Probably in detail. Hannibal would need to know what happens in them. Will would have to talk about the man.

“What do you need to know?” he asked.

Hannibal looked up, studying Will carefully for a moment, considering.

“You need not relate your dreams to me today,” he said, “I can offer some advice without hearing them. On a day you feel better equipped to deal with what they contain, we can go into further detail.”

Will sighed in relief.

“Thank you.”

16

Chapter Summary

Even more exploration of Will's aversion to touch, both present and past.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Have you given more thought to your aversion to touch, Will?” Hannibal asked, setting the plates down on the table. He leaned near Will, but didn’t touch yet. He was watching for Will’s threshold.

He was staying outside the line. At least for now.

“Yes,” Will said carefully, anxious about it, “and I’ve been tracking my reactions to people. I still can’t stand very close to Jack, or the guys in the lab. Beverly is mostly okay, but I don’t want to be touched by her. I’m too afraid of what might happen. I like her enough I don’t want anything to hurt her. If I knew more people, I’d have a more varied sample.”

Hannibal hummed, nodding in agreement.

“Did my actions at your home make you uncomfortable with my touch?” he asked, taking his seat across from Will.

Will swallowed and looked down at his plate. He didn’t feel entirely prepared to have this conversation with Hannibal right now. But talking had seemed to help before, and he had already confessed the worst part of this particular problem. So what could it hurt?

“I don’t know,” he confessed, “I’m still anxious, and today probably more than usual, but I don’t know.”

Hannibal considered that for a moment, taking a sip of his wine and watching Will carefully. His gaze was comforting. Will still wasn’t used to the way he felt around Hannibal. He wasn’t used to anyone making him feel safe. Not since he had moved away from Louisiana and Lirette. With Hannibal, it was more than that, and he had no frame of reference for what he should be feeling.

“May I touch you?” Hannibal asked.

Will flushed, heat rising to his face at the way that sounded, and the gentleness in Hannibal’s voice. It might not have made him react that way if he didn’t feel the way he did about Hannibal, but the fact was he felt as if he couldn’t live without the man. He was obsessively infatuated.

So Will jerkily nodded his head, not trusting his voice.

Hannibal stood from his seat, leaving his plate and silverware for the moment. Will was surprised. He had expected Hannibal to reach out and take his hand as he had done before. Hannibal walked over and stood beside Will, considering for a moment before he knelt so they were level with each other.

Will was frozen in place, unsure what Hannibal meant to do. He felt his entire body reacting to Hannibal's nearness, but not in the negative way he had come to associate with the proximity of others. He was just entirely aware of the man beside him.

Slowly, allowing Will to object or show discomfort, Hannibal reached out.

When his hand slid into Will's hair, Will closed his eyes. He fought to not remember a hand yanking his hair, then throwing him against the wall of the dark basement. He didn't want to think about the soft, possessive petting of the man, the tugging and manipulating. His heart began to beat faster, both from his anxiety and his new reactions to Hannibal.

"Is this alright?" Hannibal asked.

Will sucked in a shaky breath and turned, opening his eyes.

Hannibal's eyes were a warm, dark brown. Nothing like the cold and steely grey of the man. The light danced in Hannibal's eyes, sparking red and crimson as Hannibal met Will's gaze.

Will felt his heart slow.

"Yes," he said, "now it is."

Hannibal nodded thoughtfully, beginning to rub small circles in Will's scalp. It was soothing and stimulating in a strange way that had Will breaking out in goosebumps. But it wasn't unpleasant.

"Eye contact helps in this situation?" Hannibal asked softly, his voice low because he was near enough Will could still easily hear him.

Will swallowed.

"I had to be sure you weren't him," he said.

Hannibal tipped his head, but didn't speak. Will wondered if he didn't want to pry, the day being as stressful as it had been. That was considerate, and made Will's heart stutter in his chest.

"His eyes," Will explained, "they were cold and grey. I saw them so often, he made me look, I can't close my eyes without seeing his. He would always put his hand in my hair, pull it, and make me look."

Hannibal nodded again, thoughtful as he continued his soft caressing of Will's head.

“You took those eyes from him, Will,” he said gently, “you needn’t fear them anymore.”

Will shivered at the way Hannibal said it. He had a way of making violence sound not only justified, but also perfectly alright.

“I keep seeing them,” Will said, his voice barely more than a whisper, afraid talking about it would summon the eyes from wherever they hid, “Hobbs. And Stammets. Every time I remember them, they have his eyes. Cold and grey.”

Hannibal set his other hand on Will’s knee, and Will felt as if the points of contact had completed a circuit. Electricity coursed through him, making him feel entirely alive and present for the first time in a long time.

“You can overcome this, Will,” Hannibal said firmly, “you defeated him once, and you have continued to defeat him every day you live longer than him. You will be rid of him. I swear it.”

Will shuddered, overwhelmed but not upset. It was strange, to feel that. He couldn’t remember a time when being overwhelmed hadn’t resulted in an attack of some kind.

Hannibal was being honest, too. Will could see that, at least, in his eyes. There wasn’t much to see, but he could see a few things when Hannibal let them through. Now, he could see sincerity. Hannibal meant every word of it.

Will felt his eyes sting with tears.

“I want to be,” he said, his voice hoarse, “I really want to be free of him.”

Hannibal smiled.

“Good, Will,” he said, “hold onto that. When the darkness feels overwhelming and you find yourself gasping for breath, fight for this. To be free of your fear.”

—

Will opened his eyes in the hospital. He blinked up at the bright white ceiling and frowned. The last thing he remembered was calling Officer Lirette from the house and telling him he had a broken ankle.

“Will.”

Will jumped slightly and turned.

Officer Lirette was there, sitting by the bed. He had his police cap in his hands and his elbows on his knees. He was looking at Will like he was a ghost, and Will wondered for a moment if maybe he was. Maybe he had died in that basement, and was now haunting the officer he had pictured would save him.

Lirette sighed and dropped his head, and the illusion dissipated.

“Will, son,” Lirette said, “I’m so sorry.”

Will swallowed, his throat clicking. He was thirsty.

“Thank you,” Will said, “for coming when I called.”

Lirette looked up, and his eyes were brimming with tears. Will couldn’t meet his gaze, his own eyes skating away to look over Lirette’s shoulder.

“We had lost hope, Will,” he said, “I thought you were dead. I didn’t know where to look.”

Will smiled ruefully.

“Not dead yet,” he said, “I’m not that lucky.”

Lirette’s frown deepened and he reached out to take Will’s hand. Will flinched and pulled away, his heart racing at the thought of being touched. Lirette froze, then pulled his hand back, his expression pained.

“Will, if there’s anything-”

“Can I get a drink of water?” Will asked, interrupting what he knew would be some kind of platitude or apology. He couldn’t bear to hear it.

Lirette nodded and stood, walking to the door. A nurse was called, and Will was given some ice chips. He hated them, but his body was grateful after he managed to chew some up. He found he was hooked up to an IV and his ankle had been put in a cast. He didn’t know how long he had been unconscious, but he thought it must have been convenient that he had passed out. He wouldn’t have been very happy to be touched if he had been awake.

Lirette watched silently as the nurse checked all of Will’s vitals, making a considering sound when Will’s heart rate rose when she stepped near the bed. Will resolutely kept his eyes down, staring at his hands.

Someone had washed all the blood off of him while he was out. He was glad of that, though he still felt as if he could smell the coppery scent of it on his skin.

Before Will was left alone with Lirette again, Will’s dad appeared.

Monty Graham had never looked so poor in his life. He was pale and trembling, as if he had been chased by the hounds of hell before walking into that hospital room. His hair was too long and looked unwashed, and he had dirt smeared on his arms and face.

Will couldn’t even meet his own father’s eyes, feeling his chest squeeze when he looked above his chin. What if they were like *his* eyes?

“Will,” Monty breathed, rushing to the bedside, “Oh god, Will. I thought you were dead. I thought you were dead. They told me you were dead. I’m sorry. God forgive me, I’m so sorry.”

Monty was crying, sobbing as he reached for Will.

Will jerked away from him so harshly he nearly fell from the bed. The nurse moved to catch him, but Will shook his head, his breaths starting to come quick and shallow. He heard the rapid beeping of the heart rate monitor, and saw the fear in the way everyone tensed around him in the room.

“Please step away from him, mister Graham,” the nurse said, sounding confused and concerned.

“He’s my son,” Monty objected, though he dropped his arms and leaned back, “I’m allowed to touch my own son.”

“Sir,” the nurse said sternly, but Lirette stepped forward, putting a hand on Monty’s shoulder and gently guiding him back away from the bed.

“Mister Graham,” Lirette said, his voice low as if Will might not hear him, “Will is experiencing severe anxiety regarding physical contact. I don’t think it would be wise to try to touch him right now. I understand how difficult this is. Please understand me when I say I will help you and Will in any way I can.”

Monty fell into the chair by the bed, dropping his head into his hands and sobbing. Will watched this all with wide, terrified eyes. He felt like he couldn’t breathe, and he thought he might be dying.

A doctor rushed in and checked Will’s monitors, but froze and frowned in confusion when Will retreated in a panic when he tried to touch him. His chest was tight, and he couldn't breathe.

“He’s having a panic attack,” the doctor told the nurse, “we need something to calm him down.”

Will didn’t hear anything else they said. The only sound was his blood rushing in his ears as his vision blacked out.

Chapter End Notes

Lirette as a young man. Well, younger than how we've seen him before.

I hope you're enjoying the story. <3

17

Chapter Summary

Will meets another psychiatrist. He doesn't react well.

Good thing Hannibal is always there to make things better.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will woke with a start, another nightmare rushing over him and making his heart race.

Winston jumped up and laid on Will's lap, comforting him and pressing him back down into the mattress. Will pressed a hand on his chest, feeling his wild heart, and slowed his breathing.

Will wracked his brain, trying to remember what Hannibal had told him to do for his dreams.

Rewrite them. That was what he was supposed to do. He was supposed to fix them. Think of a better way for the dream to go. Play the new dream over and over, go back to sleep, and have that better dream.

It sounded like completely made up psychiatrist garbage, but Will was going to try it. He was going to try it because Hannibal said it would help. Maybe not right away, but it would help if he kept it up.

Will closed his eyes, petting absently through Winston's fur as he imagined a better ending for the nightmare.

Will had a more difficult time doing this than he had expected. Every time he imagined something good happening, thoughts and images of reality crowded in, pushing the good away. He was having to fight to hold on to the good things he could think of.

After probably about fifteen minutes of trying and failing to change the dream he had woken from, Will discarded it in favor of something different.

Will pictured the dream he'd had a while ago. The one he hadn't felt afraid of.

His chest was flayed open, and steady, gloved hands were removing his lungs. He could smell his own blood, taste it in his mouth. He could feel the gentle, sure touch of the person with the confident and soothing voice. His chest was empty, and he could finally be free. Free of the crushing weight of his own breath.

Will played it over and over in his head, not even realizing when he finally drifted off back to sleep.

Winston fell asleep in the bed with him, pressed close to offer Will warmth and comfort.

—

“Professor Graham?”

Will looked up, frowning as he slipped on his glasses. He didn’t recognize the voice of the woman walking into his classroom, and he wasn’t sure what to make of her sudden appearance.

“That’s me,” he confirmed, “mind evening the playing field?”

The woman smiled. She was beautiful, with dark hair curling at her shoulders. She was wearing a purple dress that hugged her figure well, and sensible heels. In any other situation, Will would have been more than pleased to meet her. She looked kind, and even kissable.

“I’m Alana Bloom,” she said, offering a hand to shake, “I’ve heard a lot about you.”

Will grimaced, making no move to shake her hand.

“I see. I’ve heard about you, too. Doctor Bloom, Georgetown. Specialized in family trauma. Brilliant and sociable. I expect Jack sent you to try your luck convincing me to help with the case.”

Alana’s face pinched slightly, and she dropped her hand.

“I’m sorry if you feel ambushed,” she said, “I promise I’m not here to upset you.”

Will nodded.

“I didn’t think you were. Doctor Lecter said you aren’t the coercion type, and I think he’s a good judge of character. But the question does stand,” he said, folding his arms defensively, “what exactly have you heard about me?”

Alana pressed her lips together. It was clear this wasn’t how she expected this to go, and she didn’t know what to do. Will felt a bit bad for upsetting her, especially because Jack was the reason she was here in the first place. It wasn’t her fault.

“I hear you’ve experienced some trauma, and are finding it difficult to continue working on the cases Jack wants your help on,” she said carefully, “he says you’re a gifted profiler, and you’ve been very helpful on the last two cases.”

Will huffed.

“So you haven’t been told anything helpful,” he concluded, “Jack sent you in here blind. He didn’t tell you that my trauma comes from something that happened when I was young, or that this particular case has aspects that are similar or identical to things that I experienced.

He didn't tell you that I have agreed to help on future cases, if I am allowed to skip this one. He didn't tell you that I have actually been getting better since starting to talk to Doctor Lecter. He just sent you here so you could try to figure it all out on your own."

Alana was unhappy. Will thought she might even be offended. He didn't know if that was because of him or Jack.

"What was it you went through as a child?" she asked, point blank, no preparation, "what makes this case so hard?"

Will clenched his fist, trying not to snap at her.

"Do what everyone else does," he sighed, "read TattleCrime.com. Freddie Lounds seems to know everything about it, far be it from me to figure out who told her."

Will picked up his bag and left, leaving Alana standing in his classroom in stunned silence.

Guilt gnawed at Will the entire way to his home. She hadn't done anything to him. She had tried to be kind and friendly. The only crime she had committed was being associated with Jack, and doing what she was asked. She hadn't deserved to be treated so rudely.

As Will went over it again and again, other details stuck out to him.

She had called him Professor rather than Agent or Mister. That told him she had wanted him to be unaware of who she was and why she was there. She had wanted him unassuming. She had admitted to being sent by Jack the moment he had caught her, but hadn't seemed to realize just how much Jack had neglected to tell her.

Despite having been told he was smart, she hadn't expected him to know who she was. She hadn't expected him to know his own limits and have set reasonable boundaries. She hadn't expected him to resist her attempt at friendship.

He should still probably apologize.

Will called Hannibal.

"Will," Hannibal said warmly, "what can I do for you?"

Will sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose.

"I'm not sure," he said, "I think I was just rude to Alana Bloom and I don't know how to fix it."

Hannibal hummed in consideration.

"Tell me what happened."

Will did. He explained how she had walked in without telling him she was a psychiatrist or showing she knew he worked with Jack. He explained how his annoyance with Jack had been projected onto her and resulted in his poor reaction to her gentle prodding and oblivious

questions. Hannibal listened, and Will felt ashamed by his actions, knowing Hannibal would never stand for someone to be that rude to him.

When Will was finished, he waited for Hannibal's verdict.

"Perhaps I can help you make a better second impression," Hannibal said thoughtfully, "If you were to meet her in a more honest situation, without the added stress of obligation to Jack on either side, you might find you are both more amenable."

Will frowned.

"What exactly are you suggesting?" he asked.

Hannibal had a clear smile in his voice when he replied.

"I would invite you both to dinner," he answered, "a more comfortable, low pressure situation. Alana will be able to take cues from me regarding your comfort, and I can act as a buffer between you if the need arises."

Will sighed.

If he agreed to that, he would have to go into Hannibal's dining room. He didn't think Hannibal would have Alana sit in the kitchen with them both, and a part of him didn't want that. The kitchen was more intimate, just as Hannibal had said. He didn't want Alana there with them.

"Let me think about it," Will said, "It's probably the best option, but you can probably already guess why it makes me nervous."

Hannibal hummed in agreement.

"You are not obligated to agree, of course," Hannibal said, "though I'm sure it would only help if Alana could support my opinion of you when speaking to Jack. At the very least, it could not be detrimental to you."

Will sighed again. Of course, Hannibal was right. And Hannibal actually knew Alana Bloom. He would be able to help Will fix it. If Will could just do this.

"Yeah. Thank you. Do you- I mean, is she the kind to hold a grudge?" he asked, "is it going to be hard to fix this?"

Hannibal huffed a soft laugh.

"Quite the contrary, as it happens," he said, "Alana is one of few competent psychiatrists who chooses to see the best in everyone first and foremost. I expect she has already shifted her displeasure to Jack and confronted him about it. If not, it will be a simple thing to show her you had reason to be upset. In a controlled environment, I expect she will even come to like you."

Will laughed. He couldn’t help it. The entire situation was bizarre and unbelievable. Hannibal had somehow turned it to something lighthearted and easy. Will couldn’t have ever imagined he would have someone who could do that for him.

“Never thought I’d see the day when I team up with a psychiatrist to get another psychiatrist to like me,” he said, still grinning.

“You have a very pleasant laugh, Will,” Hannibal said warmly, “I am often disappointed by its rarity.”

Will flushed, glad Hannibal wasn’t there to see his face grow red. Hannibal said things like that so suddenly he was never prepared, and the casual ease with which he spoke made it all the more strange to Will.

“I guess I haven’t had a reason to laugh in a while,” Will said, trying to make that sound less pathetic than it was, “for a long time, actually.”

Hannibal hummed thoughtfully.

“I am pleased to have earned such a unique honor,” he said.

Will chewed the inside of his cheek.

“I have to go now,” he said awkwardly, “I’ll let you know what I decide about that dinner.”

“Very good. I look forward to hearing from you again,” Hannibal said, “and our next conversation.”

Chapter End Notes

Hannibal is absolutely jumping at the chance to 'help' Will. So much potential for this going forward~

Up next: Bevelry Katz *raucous applause*

18

Chapter Summary

Beverly Katz! *cheering*

Oh yeah. Hannibal is also here.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Jack thinks you've gone totally awol."

Will looked up and recognized Beverly Katz in the door of his classroom. He didn't think Jack had sent her, but he wasn't sure why she was there.

"Because I said no to this case?" Will asked, looking back down at his laptop.

Beverly came closer, but stopped outside his range of discomfort. She was smart.

"That, and apparently you've managed to convince your therapist to take your side over his. For Jack, that looks like witchcraft."

Will huffed a laugh, smiling despite himself.

"Is Doctor Bloom not being as helpful as he was hoping?" he asked.

Beverly folded her arms.

"With the case, she's doing great. I think we're getting close. Jack isn't so happy she won't tell him what she thinks of you, though."

Will closed his laptop and settled back in his chair. He considered Beverly, curious why she was telling him this. Usually, when people talked to him, they had an agenda.

"Jack said all that?" he asked skeptically.

Beverly shrugged.

"You may be the profiler, but I've worked with Jack for years. I can tell," she said.

Will nodded. He decided he liked her. She didn't seem all that interested in pushing his buttons, and she was intelligent and blunt.

"So, what brings you here?" he asked, "I doubt *you* came to plead with me to come back."

Beverly grinned.

“Nope. Just wanted to see how you’re doing. I know that whole thing with the mushroom guy kinda freaked you out.”

Will raised an eyebrow.

That was putting it lightly.

“I’m doing as well as can be expected, I guess,” he answered, “I’d be doing a lot worse without Doctor Lecter.”

Beverly nodded.

“Well, not to alarm you, but I hope you have Lecter on speed dial,” she said, making Will tense, “Freddie Lounds again.”

Will closed his eyes. That was what she had come to tell him. At least she hadn’t come to get something from him.

“What happened now?” he asked.

“Jack scared her,” Beverly said, “she reacted like a cornered animal. She didn’t only go after you, this time, but you were mentioned, and not in a good way.”

Will sighed and nodded.

“I appreciate the warning,” he said, “I get the feeling she’s no stranger to being on the FBI’s bad side.”

Beverly snorted a laugh.

“I’ll say. I think she gets off on it, honestly. She loves to get a rise out of us. Jack especially.”

Will nodded again. There were plenty of people like that in the world. From what he could gather, Lounds had been making herself more of a problem than most. It was as impressive as it was frustrating.

“I’ll have to try to keep out of her way, then,” he said.

He didn’t think that would be too hard. He was only consulting, and hadn’t been out in the public eye at all since Eldon had evaded them that once. He had no plans to get her attention again.

“Sounds like a plan,” Beverly said, then hesitated, “there *is* something else I’ve been meaning to talk to you about.”

Will spread his hands in a bid for her to continue. He was curious what she might want to talk about. He trusted it would be more interesting than anything Price or Zeller would come up with. That probably wasn’t fair of him, but he couldn’t help thinking it.

“You wrote the Standard Monograph of Time of Death Based on Insect activity,” Beverly said, “That’s pretty huge. Why didn’t you go into forensics?”

Will smiled.

“I did,” he said, “All I do is interpret evidence. That’s where people get confused when they hear about me. I’m not a psychic.”

Beverly laughed.

“The way you found Eldon Stammets after he took Doctor Lecter could have fooled me,” she said, “The only reason Jack could find you was by seeing your car on the side of the road. What evidence did you interpret to accomplish that?”

Will’s smile dropped a bit. He thought of how close he had been to finding them too late. Just that once, he had wished he really was psychic, so he could have stopped Stammets from taking Hannibal. For the first time he could remember, he had not wanted to be normal.

“I knew he wanted to make connections, and he had learned that I could offer a connection to him. I knew he wouldn’t want to hurt me, but he would want to do me a favor so I would feel obligated to help him,” Will said, “actions are evidence, Agent Katz. And they can tell us as much as fibers or larvae can. A lot of people forget that.”

Beverly huffed a laugh and shook her head. She was confused, but not upset about it.

“I guess that answers my question. You’re a profiler because you can see things differently. I’d be so wrapped up in analyzing fibers I’d forget to establish a sequence of events,” she said, “I hope you get feeling better. Bloom is too nice. Without you around, no one’s got any flavor. There’s no friction.”

Will smiled again.

It was strange. She had acknowledged his otherness, but hadn’t made it seem like a bad thing. She didn’t seem uncomfortable around him, or even talking about how he did what he did. She didn’t think about things in psychology terms, so didn’t demand that kind of explanation from him.

“See you later,” Beverly said, heading out.

Will waved, feeling out of place after an interaction that felt so normal and easy.

When she was gone, Will opened his laptop again.

It was true, Freddie had been more focused on the rest of the team, and hadn’t gone after Will specifically.

That didn’t make what she had written any easier to read.

-Jack Crawford is using unstable minds and past victims to find new killers. Will Graham is not an FBI agent, and should be left to do his work teaching crime scene analysis to people

who will be. That is, if he should even be allowed that. Jack Crawford's willingness to pull such an unstable man into the investigations shows he is desperate. The logical conclusion would be that he had no other choice.

*Does the FBI have **no** competent profilers?-*

It really was an attack at Jack, but she had purposefully added insults to Will in order to validate her argument.

At least he doubted any killers would fixate on him because of this article. It just made him seem sad and pathetic rather than interesting.

Will resisted the urge to call Hannibal and talk about the article. He had another class to teach, and it really had nothing to do with Hannibal.

It was interesting to him that he would have that urge. He had never had anyone he felt compelled to talk to when he was upset, or someone who made him feel comfortable that way. Hannibal had made a place for himself in Will's life so quickly and firmly it was almost frightening.

But maybe it wasn't a bad thing. Will knew he had a fear of intimacy and nearness, he was afraid of letting anyone close to himself, but that didn't mean it would be bad for him to do it. He should try to make that kind of connection. Let someone reach back.

That didn't make it any less daunting.

Will could hardly remember the last time anyone had been genuinely interested in getting closer to him, and he hadn't let anyone succeed since escaping the house when he was a kid. Lirette was probably the closest thing he'd had to a real friend in the years since his father had died, but even he hadn't been able to touch Will after everything that had happened. The fact that Hannibal didn't make Will plunge directly into a panic attack by stepping close to him was a minor miracle.

As it turned out, Will didn't have to call Hannibal. As he was picking up after his last lecture of the day, Hannibal called him.

"I hope it is not an inconvenient time," Hannibal said pleasantly.

"No," Will said, "I'm just getting ready to go home. What can I do for you?"

Will didn't know why Hannibal was calling, but he thought he'd be able to bring up the article as they talked. It was convenient.

"I have invited Alana Bloom to dinner this Friday, and I had hoped you would have decided on whether you will be able to join us."

Will paused in his work, trying to come to a decision. He had been swinging between the two options for days, never sticking to one or the other. But he knew he would stick to whatever he told Hannibal today, right now.

Will thought back to his conversation with Beverly. It had gone well. He was getting better.

“I want to try,” he said nervously, “I don’t know how well I’ll do, but I want to try.”

“Excellent,” Hannibal said, and there was a clear smile in his voice, “You may come early in order to prepare yourself, if you like. I would certainly appreciate the company.”

Will smiled to himself, feeling a little better about it already, just from Hannibal’s voice. He was still anxious about seeing Alana Bloom again, but he felt that Hannibal would be able to help him.

“Alright. I’ll see you early, then,” he said, “Did you see this new article on Tattlecrime?”

Hannibal sighed softly.

“I imagine it is unpleasant,” he said, “did she write of you again?”

Will got back to work, cleaning up his notes and a stack of essays that needed to be corrected. His students were certainly benefiting from his decision to take time off from the cases. Their work was getting better, because he was able to spend more time working with them.

“She only mentioned me in passing, but it was enough that Beverly Katz thought she should warn me,” he said, “I think she’s probably afraid of writing too much about me after Stammets, but not enough to stop completely.”

Hannibal hummed in displeased agreement.

“Anyone with taste will know to disregard her words,” he said, “I rather expect Jack Crawford will be upset, though.”

Will nodded. Hannibal thought the same way about this as he did.

“If he isn’t already, he will be,” he agreed, “the article is mostly about him, calling his judgment into question and the like.”

Hannibal made a considering sound. Will wondered where he was, and what he was doing just then. He could imagine him, sitting at the desk in his office, a sketch in front of him as he spoke to Will. Maybe he was drawing one of those cathedrals or Italian churches. Will had noticed he liked those.

“How have your dreams been lately?” Hannibal asked, pulling Will from his musings.

Will grimaced.

“Still pretty bad,” he admitted, feeling as if the dark shadows under his eyes were growing even as he thought about them, “but I can get back to sleep after, now. That’s an improvement.”

“Very good,” Hannibal said warmly, “As you continue, it should improve more and more, though you know healing is not entirely linear. Perhaps someday you will feel comfortable

telling me about your dreams."

Will chewed the inside of his cheek, slinging his bag over his shoulder and heading out.

"Maybe," he said vaguely, "uh, was there anything else? I'm about to be driving."

There was the faintest sound of disappointment from Hannibal, almost so soft Will didn't catch it. If he hadn't been so nervous, overly aware of every small detail, he probably wouldn't have.

"No, nothing else," Hannibal said, "may you have a safe journey. I will see you on Friday."

Will smiled to himself, though his heart was fluttering in his chest nervously.

"Thanks, Hannibal," he said, "see you then."

Chapter End Notes

Up next: More Lirette, and the beginning of a dinner ménage à trois.

19

Chapter Summary

Another phone call with Lirette, and Will tries not to trip over himself to get Alana to like him.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will called Lirette again. He felt bad for not calling very often, and talking to Lirette always helped him feel less alone.

“Will Graham,” Lirette said, then coughed, “You’re always surprising me. Keep this up and you’ll be calling more often than Macy.”

Will huffed a laugh, already put at ease by the man’s voice.

Macy was Lirette’s daughter, and Will knew she had moved up north to pursue a career in acting. Her dream was Broadway. Will worried about her, but he never told Lirette what he expected had happened to her.

“I feel bad for not calling often enough,” he said, “You’re my hero, and you deserve better.”

Lirette laughed, a croaky, coughing sound. It made Will ache with sadness and anticipated grief.

“You know, Will,” Lirette said, “You’re *my* hero. You’re pulling yourself out of dark places every day, and fighting evil. You saved yourself, and now you’re saving everyone else.”

Will huffed softly, bitterly.

“I don’t know if any of this is worth it. If any of it matters,” he confessed, “Sometimes I don’t feel like I’m saving anyone.”

Lirette coughed again, and Will heard a nurse offer him something. Lirette shooed her away, and put the phone back to his ear.

“Don’t you say that, Will,” Lirette said, “You’re putting the bad guys away, and helping the next generation of agents get there. Don’t think I don’t care about your teaching. If that’s all you can do, that’s enough. But you’re the best at what you do.”

Will sighed.

“Alright. How have things been with you recently? Beat up any criminals lately?” Will asked, teasing the old man.

“Hell, I wish,” Lirette replied, “no. Things around here are quiet. Boring.”

Lirette paused, but Will knew he had more to say.

“Boring is good, though, actually,” he said, “boring is great, when you’ve seen the things I’ve seen.”

Will took a deep breath, wishing there was something he could do for Lirette. He felt powerless, sometimes. Watching someone he cared about suffer like this always managed it, because he knew there was nothing he could do.

“I’ve been dreaming of Caroline again,” Lirette said softly, almost curiously, “She’s just as pretty as the day we met.”

Will felt like he might cry. It always scared him when Lirette talked about Caroline. It made Will afraid he was really dying.

“She’ll always be that pretty,” Will said warmly, despite his terror, “the people we love are always bathed in the warm amber glow of our affection.”

Lirette laughed pleasantly.

“Now you’re a poet,” he said, “sounds like you found someone for yourself, I think. Am I right?”

Will felt his face flush, and he coughed nervously.

“Well, I guess I’m down pretty hard,” he admitted, wetting his lips, “but you know I’ve got baggage and problems. Most people wouldn’t want to get into something with me.”

Lirette coughed, then made the sound of fatherly disapproval Will had grown to recognize. His own father had made the same sound, but it had always been different from Lirette. Lirette understood Will more than his dad ever had.

“Don’t talk about yourself that way, Graham,” Lirette chided, “and don’t you think it either. Whoever this is that you’ve found for yourself, they would be a fool not to know they found one wonderful catch. Anyone would be lucky to have you.”

Will sighed, knowing Lirette meant well but not quite able to believe it. He saw the way people looked at him, Alana Bloom and Jack Crawford. If they didn’t pity him, they saw him as a tool near the point of breaking, and just wanted one more good job out of him. He wasn’t something anyone really wanted.

“Well, I guess we’ll have to see. I’ve got a… sort of a test this friday. I think It’s going to affect the way they see me. Hopefully I’ll do well.”

Lirette made a curious sound, pulling the phone away from his face when he coughed again.

“Call me and tell me about it when you can,” he said, “and if you need me to, I can come up there and tell them what’s what. You know I will.”

Will laughed, shaking his head.

“I’ll call,” he promised, “but you and I both know the nurses there are deadly serious about keeping you there. I hear they have training in martial arts.”

Lirette laughed, but it turned into a bad cough, sounding like he was about to lose a lung.

“You’ve still got that wizard wit, Will,” Lirette said when he caught his breath, “you make me proud. Don’t you ever forget that you’re a good person, Will. Don’t lose sight of that.”

“I won’t,” Will promised, “And don’t you forget that you’re my hero, Officer Lirette.”

Lirette laughed again, but his coughing got so bad he had to get off the call. A nurse came on and told Will the latest news on Lirette’s condition, and Will thanked her before turning off his phone and letting tears run down his face.

—

Will had seen on the news that Jack had found the missing boys. They had all been together with a woman, capture bonded and convinced to kill their own families. Except for one, who had been killed and disowned.

They hadn’t saved the families. But they had caught the woman and saved the kids.

As much as they possibly could be saved.

Will was nervous and fidgety as he walked up the steps to Hannibal’s house again. He felt like Alana Bloom might be angry with him for being the reason she had been on the case. It was surely upsetting, and she had been involved, getting into the head of the woman who had done such a horrible thing. It was Will’s fault if she was traumatized.

But Hannibal was going to help him. Hannibal was going to try to make it better, so she wouldn’t hate him.

Will hoped it would work.

“Will,” Hannibal said, smiling warmly, “please come in.”

Hannibal stepped out of the way for Will to enter the house, already sporting an apron and rolled up shirtsleeves. The scents of good food clung to him like cologne, and Will found that comforting.

“Do you really think this will work?” Will asked, his body tense despite his efforts to not freak out.

Hannibal hummed softly, leading Will to the kitchen.

“Actually, I am quite optimistic,” he said, “Alana has approached me already to express her feelings about you. She believes you did not mean any harm, and she regrets putting you in an uncomfortable position. Our work has already been cut down for us.”

Will let out a soft, relieved sigh.

“You were right, then,” he said, “about her. She doesn’t hold grudges.”

Hannibal smiled, getting back to work at the stove as Will sat down in what he was starting to consider his seat at the kitchen table.

“She is capable of it,” Hannibal said, “in fact, when she decides to hold a grudge she is nearly impossible to argue with. However, I had an idea you had not done anything quite unforgivable. Despite what you may believe, you are quite a pleasant person to be around.”

Will huffed derisively.

Most people would beg to differ, but he appreciated the thought. More than that, he could see Hannibal meant it truly. Hannibal didn’t seem to feel there was any reason for someone to dislike Will.

Will liked that.

“I’m going to do my best,” Will said, scraping his thumb nail under his lip, “I just hope my mistakes aren’t going to reflect poorly on you.”

Hannibal glanced up at Will, his expression unreadable.

“I am not ashamed of you, Will,” he said, “You are not something to be hidden. You have spent far too long in the shadows and the dark. I would have you walk in the sun, without shame, your head held high. I think you look quite well when you are confident with yourself.”

Will felt his face flush, but he didn’t have a chance to answer because Hannibal’s doorbell rang.

There was a flicker of something across Hannibal’s features. It looked like displeasure or annoyance. It was gone before Will could really tell.

“I think Doctor Bloom is a bit earlier than I expected,” Hannibal said smoothly, wiping his hands and walking to the door of the kitchen. He paused there, meeting Will’s gaze steadily. “You have nothing to fear, Will.”

Will swallowed and nodded, listening as Hannibal walked to the front door and answered it. He heard their voices, greeting each other pleasantly, and a knife twisted in his gut. It was part anxiety and part jealousy at how pleased Hannibal sounded to see her.

Will stood up as they came near the kitchen, straightening his clothes and trying to look as normal as he could. That was a laugh.

“-and I thought you might want a hand in the kitchen,” Alana was saying as they entered, “I know you like to cook for an audience.”

She stopped in her tracks when she saw Will, apparently unsure how she should react to him being there.

“Oh, I see you already have an audience. I’m sorry if I’m interrupting something,” she said, frowning in confusion.

“No,” Will said quickly, before Hannibal could step in and do it for him, “You’re not. I’m compulsively early, and Doctor Lecter was kind enough to humor me so I’m not a nervous wreck tonight.”

Alana smiled at Hannibal, beautiful with her long dark hair over one shoulder. Hannibal returned the expression, and Will felt the knife twist again.

“Hannibal is always accommodating to his guests,” she said, “I’m glad to see you again, Will. I feel like we got off on the wrong foot.”

Will huffed a nervous laugh, shifting on his feet a bit.

“Yeah. I thought you were there to be an informant for Jack, so I was rude to you even when you said you weren’t. We started off with vast misunderstanding as a chasm between us, and I failed to cross it while you at least tried. I really apologize for that.”

Alana smiled, and it was a bright, pleasant expression. Will could see how easily someone might fall in love with her.

“I’m glad we’re trying again,” she said, “I hate leaving anyone upset after something like that.”

Will offered his own, wavering smile. The fact that they had already begun forgiving each other made him all the more nervous. It felt like he was making room for more mistakes during the rest of dinner.

“Will,” Hannibal said, “Would you be so kind as to set the table?”

Will took a deep breath and nodded. He could see why Hannibal was asking it of him, and he was grateful. Will needed something to do, to keep him from just saying whatever came to mind and messing it all up after coming so far. Additionally, it gave Will a chance to see how he would react to the dining room tonight.

Hannibal was aware of everything Will might need.

Will took some plates and silverware and headed through the door to the dining room as Hannibal asked Alana to help him with dinner. Part of Will felt as if he was being pushed out, but he knew better than that. He knew Hannibal didn’t want Alana to offer to go with Will, exacerbating what could be a stressful moment for him.

Will prepared himself, but still stopped in the doorway, staring at the table.

Hannibal had figured out what upset Will. He had made changes to accommodate him.

Chapter End Notes

Up next: Will can't help but be jealous, and Hannibal is a flirt.

20

Chapter Summary

The conclusion of the dinner menage a trois

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The dining room had been dark and foreboding last time Will had seen it. It had reminded him of a cave, or the basement he had known for the worst period of his life to this point. It had felt suffocating and daunting. At the same time, the glass doors had left him feeling exposed and watched, as if anyone could have looked in at him.

Now, some things had changed.

The table was now covered with a bright white tablecloth, in itself making the room feel larger and less dark. The lights themselves seemed brighter, and Will thought he had changed the wattage or something. Will didn't know everything else that had changed, but he suddenly found it a far less intimidating space.

The glass doors had been covered with elegant blue shades, a light color that again made the room feel brighter and less frightening. He felt as if he could be in there without feeling exposed or claustrophobic.

Hannibal had done this for him.

Will set the places with a slight tremble in his hand. He had an unfamiliar emotion coursing through him, nearly overwhelming him. It was more than just gratitude, and more than the slowly growing attraction he had been feeling for Hannibal. It was bigger than that, and more confusing.

Will finished his task and took a deep breath before returning to the kitchen. Alana was standing by the counter near Hannibal, a glass in hand. There were two other glasses on the counter, one near Hannibal and one set apart, far enough away from either of them that Will would comfortably be able to take it. He noticed cautiously that Alana had beer rather than wine, while both his and Hannibal's glasses held a deep, rich red liquid.

"Not a fan of wine?" Will asked, stepping further into the room and drawing both their gazes.

Alana smiled.

“I prefer beer,” she said, “and Hannibal’s is always the best. His food is also amazing. You’ll definitely be impressed.”

Will prickled a bit at the insinuation that he had never eaten Hannibal’s food before. Alana saw him as nothing more than a patient of Hannibal’s. She probably didn’t think Hannibal would want anything to do with Will.

Will tried to push those thoughts away. It was unfair to Alana. Rude and judgmental.

Will smiled wryly.

“He hasn’t failed to impress me yet,” he offered vaguely.

Hannibal glanced up at Will with a smile. He lifted his glass of wine and nodded gently to Will before taking a sip.

Will knew what Hannibal meant by the gesture, and he stepped up to the counter and picked up his own glass.

“Will has keen observation skills and a sharp perception,” Hannibal said to Alana, “I consider it a great achievement to ever impress him. I hope someday to find a way to surprise him as well.”

Confusion flashed over Alana’s expression, clearly picking up on the fact that Hannibal considered Will more than a patient.

“Is that so?” She asked, taking a sip of her beer to cover up her confusion, “I find that hard to believe. You don’t really bend over backwards to impress people, Hannibal.”

Hannibal smiled as he worked, carefully plating the food.

“I do not often find anyone I deem worthy of the effort,” he replied.

Will felt his mouth go dry, and he took another drink of his wine. Alana glanced between the two of them, a frown on her soft features. Will just stared at Hannibal’s hands, not sure anywhere else was safe.

“Come,” Hannibal said, lifting the finished plates expertly, “Let us sit. Will, would you be so kind as to bring my glass?”

Will nodded and reached for the glass as Alana followed Hannibal into the dining room.

Alana would probably think Hannibal was giving Will tasks in order to give them some time alone together, or just give them some space from him. Will knew differently, but he wasn’t happy thinking she saw him that way. Like he was the third wheel.

When Will met them in the dining room, he saw that Alana had been seated to Hannibal’s right, and he wondered if he was the one who didn’t understand.

Will quietly set Hannibal's glass down and took the seat to Hannibal's left, feeling his heart start to thud in his chest at the idea that he was not wanted there.

"Thank you, Will," Hannibal said pleasantly, "as always, an extra pair of hands is appreciated."

Will nodded, staring at his plate. It smelled absolutely delicious, and he hoped he wouldn't panic and leave without eating it all. That would be rude, and even if it didn't change how Hannibal thought of him, it would certainly make Alana question his ability to function as a human.

Hannibal introduced the dish, Lomo Saltado, filling the air with his easy, elegant speech. Will could tell he really enjoyed cooking, and was proud of his work. It was endearing, and Will couldn't help but fall more in love with him as he spoke. He thought Alana probably felt a similar way, and that knife twisted again.

Hannibal deserved someone good and whole like Alana. That didn't make Will any less jealous.

"I was rude and intrusive when we met, Will," Alana said after a moment of silence as they ate, "I asked questions that I shouldn't have. I'm horrified just thinking about it. I'm so sorry."

Will smiled, but kept his eyes down on his plate.

"I pushed you, and you didn't know how to react," he said, "a cornered animal will lash out, even if it's usually a prey item. We both said things we regret, and I'm sorry about it."

Will could feel Alana's smile in the air like the rays of the sun. Even though Will was beginning to resent her, purely because of how he felt she thought of him and his own jealousy of her, he knew she was pleasant to be around. Part of him resented her more for that.

"Then let's try to do it over," Alana said, "how did you start working with Jack?"

Will caught a slight hesitation in Hannibal's movements. He knew what had happened, but he was going to let Will say what he wanted. Will wondered if he would say anything if he decided to lie outright.

"Jack heard about me and my… unique way of thinking," Will began vaguely, "we'd met before, but hadn't really talked about work. When he was stuck on the shrike case, he came by my classroom to ask for help."

Will felt it was safest to stick as close to the truth as possible, but he was leaving out the bad parts.

"Was this the first time you worked on a case?" Will asked, hoping to redirect the conversation away from himself. He knew people generally liked to be asked about

themselves. He usually forgot, or didn't put in the effort. Tonight, he was trying to be pleasant, if not normal.

"It's the first one I've helped Jack with," Alana said, "and I haven't worked on anything criminal like this in a while. I've usually avoided serial murder, specialized in family trauma as I am. It was so sad to see those boys going through what they did. I just hope we can help them heal."

Will bit his tongue hard to avoid snapping something about how they would never heal. He knew they would never be the same. They would always be broken, and anyone who found out what had happened would treat them like glass.

Or like a bird with a broken wing.

"Will, how are your dogs?" Hannibal asked.

Will looked up at him, blinking. It was only then that he realized his breaths were coming short and shallow, and his chest was tight. He felt his pulse in his neck, and wondered if it was visible to Hannibal.

Hannibal was throwing him a lifeline. Something to think about other than the case and the stolen boys.

Will swallowed, willing his heart to slow.

"They're alright," he said, his voice a little unsteady, "uh, Winston doesn't like that there's another chair on the porch now. I'm not allowed to sit in it, either."

Hannibal smiled fondly.

"Do you believe he sees me as a threat to you?" he asked.

Will shrugged.

"He might be worried, but he'll get over it. He can tell I'm getting better."

"I've been thinking of getting a dog," Alana said thoughtfully, "I just don't have any clue where to start. Where did you get your dogs, Will?"

Will felt his chest loosen. Hannibal had been brilliant to turn the conversation this way. It was a safe and comfortable topic for Will, and it looked like Alana was open to it as well.

He explained that most of them were strays, or pets that had been abandoned near his house. Living as remotely as he did, people often drove out there to leave an unwanted pet in a field or by the side of the road. Will just collected them. He couldn't stand to see them unhappy and vulnerable. Alana asked questions about each of the dogs, and Will answered.

Hannibal had been right. By the end of dinner, Alana seemed to actually like Will.

"Do you need any help cleaning up?" Alana asked Hannibal as they finished.

“Actually, Will already offered to,” Hannibal said, though Will had done no such thing, “Let me see you out. Will, would you take our dishes to the kitchen?”

Will nodded, silently grateful he wouldn’t be leaving at the same time as Alana. He hated when conversations lingered out the door that way, making it awkward at the cars or when they had to walk in different directions. He was tired, and didn’t want Alana to see that.

Will carefully stacked the plates and carried them into the kitchen, afraid of falling and breaking them. He set them gently next to the sink, but didn’t know what else to do. He didn’t want to do anything wrong.

After a moment, Will heard the front door close, and Hannibal walked back into the kitchen.

“I hope you do not mind my white lie,” Hannibal said with a smile, removing his jacket and laying it over the back of a chair, “I wanted to talk to you without Alana, and that was the surest way.”

Will smiled and shook his head. Hannibal stepped up to the sink, rolling up his sleeves, and began to wash the dishes.

“Thank you,” Will said, nervously wringing his hands together, unsure what he was supposed to do, “for all of it. The dining room, being a buffer. All of it. I would have ruined everything if I was left to my own devices.”

Hannibal glanced at Will with a soft, warm expression.

“I think you are quite capable, Will,” he said, “the problem is that you are out of practice, and others are too quick to judge. You are the one who charmed Alana Bloom tonight. I merely provided a backdrop.”

Will laughed, feeling suddenly exhausted. He put a hand to his brow and shook his head.

“I don’t even have the energy to argue with you right now,” he said, “but charming is not a word often used to describe me. I’m starting to wonder if there might be something wrong with you.”

Hannibal dried his hands and faced Will fully, studying him with a smile on his face.

“As I said, many are too quick to judge,” he said, “but I am curious. Would you mind if I touch you now, though you are tired?”

Will felt his shoulders tense, but he felt a violent rush of possessiveness. He had not seen Hannibal touch Alana once over dinner, and he wanted to have that over her. It was jealous and mean, but he wanted it.

“I don’t know,” he admitted, knowing how Hannibal would respond to it.

Hannibal stepped forward and took Will’s hands, pulling them apart from their anxious wringing. Will felt his heart skip a beat, but it didn’t thud in his chest and his breathing stayed

steady. Will lifted his eyes and met Hannibal's gaze, those warm, dark brown eyes making him feel calm and safe.

"It's almost funny," Will said bitterly, "I don't think he ever really touched my hands. He didn't care about my hands the way he did the rest of me."

Will shivered convulsively, blinking but holding eye contact.

"Our hands are the key to knowing the world," Hannibal said softly, kneading the muscles of Will's hands gently, "Touch gives the world emotional context. Contact with our hands is intimate. I imagine you would be worse off if you had trauma related to this as well."

Will nodded, mesmerized by Hannibal's low voice and the warm touch of his hands. He couldn't remember the last time he had felt as safe as he did then.

"Do you trust that my touch is safe, Will?" Hannibal asked.

Will huffed.

"Obviously," he said.

Hannibal raised an eyebrow.

"It is not obvious. You work with Jack, though I doubt you entirely trust him to keep his promises, and protect you. You may allow this, without trusting that I will not hurt you."

Will flushed.

"I thought we already established that's not what makes me averse to touch," he said.

Hannibal nodded thoughtfully, a hint of a smile pulling at the corner of his mouth.

"Indeed. But that begs the question. Do you still fear to touch me?"

Will's hands flexed, reflexively gripping Hannibal's before he could think about it. The action made Hannibal's smile widen, and Will's heart skipped again.

"You are making wonderful progress, Will," Hannibal said, "and I am honored to be a part of it."

Will felt his face heat more, and he tore his eyes away from Hannibal's. Instead, he looked down at their entwined hands, bewildered by the sight. He couldn't remember the last person who had touched him like this without striking fear into his heart.

"I should go home," Will said after a moment of silence, "I have dogs that need to be walked."

Hannibal gave his hands one final squeeze, then released him.

"Of course," he said, "allow me to walk you out."

Hannibal walked Will to the door, lingering near as if to keep the progress they had made from relapsing. Will felt his heart skipping in his chest, the sensation still novel to him that he would feel nervous in a good way.

“Let me know when you make it home safely,” Hannibal said, “I do worry for you.”

Will’s chest ached, and he wanted to say something. He wanted to do something. He wasn’t sure what, or how to do it. He just wanted.

“I will,” he said eventually, and stepped out into the night.

Hannibal watched him walk to his car, a silhouette in the doorway of his house. A shadow protecting Will through its presence alone. Comforting Will in a way he hadn’t ever expected to feel again.

Will drove into the night, the electricity from Hannibal’s touch keeping him awake even after the long drive was over.

Chapter End Notes

Up next: More Lirette! And some of Will's daddy.

21

Chapter Summary

You can all thank Lirette after this chapter. He truly shaped Will's life. His poor daddy, though.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"He won't even look me in the eye anymore. He was always a weird kid, but now I don't know what to do. He won't talk about it with me. I can't *touch* him without sending him into an attack. What am I supposed to do?"

Will lay in his bed, tears streaming down the sides of his face and wetting his hair. His dad didn't know he was awake, didn't know Will could hear him. Will wasn't mad at him, of course. His dad wasn't doing anything wrong. It made sense for him to be confused and frustrated, and it was good he was talking to someone.

Will was frustrated with himself. He didn't want his dad to be hurting over what had happened. He wished he could go back to how he had been before it all happened.

But he wasn't safe. Every time someone tried to touch Will, he would see the man's face, mangled and bloody and eyeless. He was dangerous, and anyone he touched would die. He was sure of it.

He couldn't do that to his dad. He couldn't even bring himself to tell his dad what had happened. He had begged Lirette to keep it a secret as well.

He *did* have someone he talked to, like his dad did.

Will left his bedroom, shuffling down the hall towards the kitchen. His dad went silent when he heard Will's door, and was already facing him when Will stepped into the doorway of the kitchen.

Monty Graham was holding the phone in his hand, but almost as if he had forgotten it was there. Will could feel his hope and expectation when he saw Will there, thinking maybe he would finally talk.

"Daddy, can I go to Lirette's?" Will asked quietly.

Monty sighed softly but nodded.

“I’ll call to make sure he’s expecting you,” he said, “make sure you call when you get there, and when you leave again.”

Will nodded and turned away. This was the new routine. He was allowed to go to Lirette’s, but he had to let his dad know his every move. Monty was afraid Will would be snatched again.

Will wasn’t worried about that. He was worried he would hurt someone. He was worried someone would try to snatch him, and he would kill them.

But he did what he could to make his dad feel better.

It was funny, the way everything changed. They had never worried about Will being kidnapped until it had happened. Will had gone wherever he wanted whenever he wanted, and they hadn’t ever thought anything bad would happen. And he had been taken from his own home. What a joke.

Statistically, it was almost astronomically unlikely he would be taken again. Will wondered if that was because everyone reacted this way, with exaggerated care.

Lirette answered the door with his usual smile, but Will was staring at his shoes. He could smell cigarettes, and he knew Lirette had probably only put it out because he knew Will was coming. For some reason he still refused to smoke when Will was around.

“Come on in, son,” Lirette said, “go ahead and call your dad. I know he wants to know you made it safely here.”

Will nodded and walked to the kitchen.

Sometimes he wondered why people always had their phones in the kitchen. He figured it was statistically more likely for them to be in the kitchen when a call came than anywhere else in a house. People had to eat, after all. His dad said people with bigger houses would have a special room or nook for their phones specifically. Will wasn’t sure he believed that, but he didn’t argue.

Will went back into the sitting room after he called his dad. Lirette had gotten them each a pop, and there was a plate of cookies on the little coffee table.

Will’s chair was across from the couch, where Lirette was sitting. When Will wasn’t there, the chair sat in the corner, unused. Lirette said it had always sat there, because they forgot about it. When Will started coming over, it was finally given a purpose again.

Will sat down and opened his pop, running his fingers through the moist condensation on the glass bottle. The cookies smelled fresh, but Will didn’t hear Caroline anywhere in the house. He guessed she had gone out to get milk, since Lirette hadn’t offered him a glass of it to go with the cookies.

“Do you need to talk, or just be here?” Liretted asked after a swig of his own pop.

He knew sometimes Will didn't want to talk, but needed to get away from his dad and all the hurt and fear in the air between them.

"He's upset," Will said, his head down and his hair in his face.

Lirette knew he was talking about his dad.

"He wants to help me, but he doesn't know how. He wants to touch me, and he wants me to meet his eyes."

Will couldn't suppress the shudder when he thought about those things.

"You feel like he's upset you can't go back to normal," Lirette said, and Will nodded, "he's not. He's your dad, and he feels like he can't protect you. He feels like he can't help you. He's afraid."

Will frowned and took a drink of his pop. He understood what Lirette was saying, but didn't know why the difference mattered. Will still couldn't touch him or meet his eyes.

"We need to give him a way to help, and give you a way to show him you're going to be okay," Lirette said thoughtfully.

Will took a cookie and began to nibble on it.

"How?" he asked. He wasn't sure he would ever be okay again, so he was dubious of this plan.

Lirette thought about it for a long time. He leaned back on the couch and looked at the ceiling.

"Do you like dogs?" Lirette asked eventually.

Will blinked in confusion, glancing up at Lirette's shoulder.

"Yeah," he said.

Honestly, he loved dogs. He had always wanted one, but never asked because he knew they couldn't really afford one.

Lirette nodded.

"We need him to think it's his idea, but he should get you a dog," he said.

Will frowned, staring at Lirette's chest pointedly. Lirette smiled.

"And that's something you can do, you don't have to look him in the eye, but get closer. Look at his shoulder, or past his head. Let him see your eyes, even if you don't look right at his. Do you think you can do that?"

Will thought about it as he finished his cookie.

“Maybe,” he said carefully, “but why a dog?”

Lirette nodded. He was getting excited about it.

“A big one,” he said, “I was reading a book about different kinds of therapy recently, and there’s a really good one with dogs. Deep pressure therapy. You get a dog, and bring it with you here. We’ll train it to help you.”

Will didn’t quite understand what all that meant, but he agreed. That was when they started planning how to get Monty Graham to think of it himself.

—

Will woke up, gasping for air and shaking. Winston jumped up onto the bed and lay on him, grounding him and reminding him he was real, and alive. Will took in a breath, his chest unlocking and his mind clicking back into the present moment.

Will sighed and closed his eyes, images from his dream flashing on the backs of his eyelids. Those grey eyes, the dark and the anger.

Look at me. Look at me. Look at me.

Will clenched his jaw and put a hand into Winston’s fur, petting through it and trying to get as much comfort from his presence as he could. He tried rewriting the dream, the way Hannibal had told him to. He tried to imagine it happening a different way.

The problem was that his dream hadn’t been a fiction. It was a memory. He knew what had happened, so his imagination was having a hard time changing it, even as an exercise.

Which was why Will had been most successful getting back to sleep after imagining an entirely different scenario. Imagining Hannibal’s hands taking his lungs from his chest. Hearing Hannibal’s voice in his head, when so often it was another, much less pleasant voice.

Will gave up on rewriting his dream, instead playing one of his conversations with Hannibal through his head. The one he always fell back on. A part of him felt guilty, or slightly ashamed for it. He was replaying the scene like he was some protagonist in a romance made for television. Clinging onto every one of Hannibal’s words like a lovesick fool.

But he had never felt so safe or cherished before that moment.

“You took those eyes from him, Will. You needn’t fear them anymore.”

Will smiled to himself, in his bed in his dark house. He remembered the way Hannibal had insisted on telling him he was safe. Hannibal believed in Will in a way no one had, without even knowing the whole story. Will’s father had never believed Will could leave it behind. Lirette had tried to do what he could for Will, but he was just an old detective. He didn’t know what to do.

“You can overcome this, Will. you defeated him once, and have continued to defeat him every day you live longer than him. You will be rid of him. I swear it.”

Will remembered the way Hannibal had set his hand firmly on Will’s knee, one hand still in his hair. He felt so warm and held.

The way Hannibal said Will’s name left Will feeling pleasantly overwhelmed. That was something that was still strange to him, but he liked it. He was at a point in his life where he could finally go towards new things without fear. He could face the unknown. Because Hannibal was there to help him.

Will fell asleep again, smiling softly.

Chapter End Notes

Up next: Another phone call with a retired detective, another flash from the past, and a surprise visit.

22

Chapter Summary

Lirette manages to surprise Will for once, and Will has a nice evening ahead of him.

Warning: in the flashback in this chapter, it gets a bit more serious than the previous ones. Nothing explicit, but it could trigger people.

Maybe I'm being too careful with it, but past feedback is making me be cautious.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“How’d your date go?” Lirette asked immediately, making Will huff and roll his eyes.

“I didn’t say it was a date,” he corrected, “I said it was a kind of test. Something to determine how they were gonna see me going forward.”

Lirette made a sound somewhere between a scoff and a sigh, indicating that he didn’t see that the difference mattered much, and Will should just get on with it. Will smiled, shaking his head at the man’s attitude.

“Fine, alright. It went really well, actually,” Will said, smiling to himself as he remembered what had happened after Alana had left. He was blushing all over again, like a kid with a crush. Funny, that wasn’t exactly something he was familiar with. “I think I might actually have a chance. And I’m getting better. Slowly but surely, there is improvement.”

Part of Will hoped Lirette would be distracted by the improvement, and ask about it. Sidetracking the conversation away from what he knew Lirette was likely to ask next if they kept talking about the “date”.

“You planning to tell me about this person, boy?” Lirette asked, not fooled by Will’s feeble attempt, “or do you expect me to use my sharp detective skills?”

Will refrained from laughing, but it was a near thing. Lirette hadn’t ever really been able to figure things out if Will wanted to keep them away. It was one thing they knew, but it was never spoken aloud between them.

“Hit me with your best guess, and maybe I’ll correct you,” Will said.

Lirette coughed, but it wasn’t one of the bad ones. It almost made Will feel hope that he was healing.

“Okay. Let me just think for a minute,” Lirette said, and Will could picture his eyes squinting in his comedic parody of a television detective. He always did that when he knew it wasn’t serious. “A fellow teacher at the academy? Short, big green eyes, long auburn hair… Give me something, son. I’m dying over here.”

Will laughed. It was another good laugh, but not as sure as the ones Hannibal could elicit.

“Wrong on all counts,” he said, “Taller than me by about an inch probably. Psychiatrist. Short, sandy hair. Eyes the color of Sanguinaccio dolce.”

Lirette chuckled softly.

“He sounds wonderful, Will.”

Will stilled, his skin feeling suddenly chilled.

“What,” Lirette said, “You thought just because you didn’t specify gender you could keep that from me? Maybe my detective skills are better than you thought.”

Will let out a long breath.

“I owe you an apology,” he said, “I guess getting old hasn’t dulled you a bit.”

Lirette laughed.

“Son, I’ve known you swing both ways since you were sixteen, sitting on my couch and eating Caroline’s cookies with milk. And you only ever hedge around it if they’re not a girl. I never told you I knew, ‘cause you never seemed ready to settle. I think you finally found your person, and I’m happy for both of you.”

Will shook his head. After all these years, Lirette had managed to surprise him.

“Thank you. That means the world to me. But you know we’re not actually together yet, right? He might not even like me that way.”

Lirette scoffed.

“Then get on it, boy! Bat your pretty eyelashes at him. Do something. You’re not getting any younger, and happiness waits for no man. Do yourself a favor, and seize the day.”

Will closed his eyes, smiling to himself. He had expected Lirette to say something along those lines. It was just the way he was. Sorta like the ladies from the church who would shower you in hospitality, smothering you to the point where it almost became hostility. Except that Lirette was actually being kind because that was how he was. He had no ulterior motives, and wanted Will to be happy. The ladies from church would never have supported Will in this kind of thing. Much less been genuinely happy about it.

“I’ll try,” Will promised.

—

Will pressed his eyes shut, praying harder than he ever had before.

Monty Graham didn't ascribe to any religious denomination, but it was impossible to avoid it in culture and conversation, living where they did. Will had been exposed to all sorts of religious fanatics and devout bible thumpers as he grew up. He knew God was supposed to answer prayers.

He was supposed to help people.

Will prayed that someone would find him, that the man would let him go, that he would find a way to escape without the man catching him. Anything that could get him out of this place. He was scared, and hurt. The dark was suffocating, always closing in around him when the man left him there alone. For hours or days, Will couldn't know. He just knew it was always dark after the man left.

He had never disliked the dark before.

Will's prayer was cut short when the door opened, streaming light down at him and momentarily blinding him. He blinked, gasping a bit in surprise, and his nose was filled with that now familiar scent.

Rotting fruit.

The man always had it with him. Will thought he brought a rag down in his pocket every time he saw Will. Just in case Will tried anything, or if he was just a bit more tense than he liked. He used it to make Will relax, and cooperate.

"Little bird," the man crooned down, his feet on the stairs like the preamble to a horror film, "what are we doing today?"

Will shifted, pulling his knees to his chest. The chain around his ankle clanked with the movement, making him wince. The man didn't like it if he made a lot of noise. Not that it had helped during those first few days, screaming and crying for help or mercy. Will had learned pretty quick that being quiet would serve him better.

The man set aside a tray of food, walking towards Will.

The chain was a punishment for trying to escape. Will knew it would be gone soon if he obeyed. If he could make the man believe he was exactly what he wanted.

"Look at me."

Will swallowed, but forced himself to meet the man's eyes. They were cold and grey, shooting ice through Will's veins. He hated those eyes. He had since the first time he had looked. Since the first time he had seen.

"Tell me what you see."

Will pressed his hands together to keep the man from seeing him tremble.

“You’re happy today,” Will said softly, “they ran another article about me in the paper. It was smaller, but they’re still looking for me. There are new posters up. Everyone thinks I’m dead, but they’re still looking. My daddy is still looking.”

The man grinned, and Will could see how pleased he was by it all. By the ongoing search. By the desperation. By Will’s ability to see. It made him nearly thrum with energy.

Will hated that. He hated what happened when the man had energy he needed to get rid of.

Will knew what it was. He had learned about it. It was a topic that, while no one enjoyed talking about it, everyone knew it was unwise to leave everyone ignorant. Will knew the word for what the man did.

But he couldn’t admit it to himself. He couldn’t think *that word* in relation to what he was going through. Part of it was the social aversion to mention of it, he knew. It was also just innate avoidance, as if refusing to acknowledge it meant it wasn’t happening.

“Clever bird,” the man said, reaching out and caressing Will’s face, “special little thing. How do you know so much? Who gave you this gift?”

Not God. That was sure. Will could feel the absence of any greater power, here in the dark basement with the man. If there was a god, he was not present in this place. He would not answer the prayer of one frightened boy, now.

The man hadn’t wanted Will to answer, anyway. Will knew that. The man was busying himself already, too excited to let Will eat before he got started.

Will wasn’t allowed to close his eyes, but he didn’t see any of it happen. He felt his mind detach, like watching a stone sink into a lake.

—

Will hadn’t seen Jack again in the past few weeks. He wasn’t sure if it was because Jack was respecting the boundaries Will had set or was just upset with Will and expected him to come looking after a while.

If that was the case, Will expected Jack would be disappointed. Will didn’t have the desire to go looking for a case to work on. He had enough work to keep his mind busy and was working up the courage to tell Hannibal about his dreams. Their conversations were the best part of Will’s week now, other than his dogs. He felt comfortable with Hannibal in a way he hadn’t thought was still an option for him. Even Lirette had never managed to get this close.

Hannibal hadn’t cooked for Will again since the dinner with Alana Bloom, which made him slightly nervous at times. Whenever he talked with Hannibal, his mind was put at ease, though. Hannibal was just busy, being a man with an actual social life and friends. He still made the time to call Will frequently, and seemed truly happy to see him whenever it was time for one of their sessions. Will wasn’t being thrown aside or discarded. He just had to stop being so jealous.

He had no reason to be jealous, really. No right to. He was happy with the way things were between himself and Hannibal. The only reason he was wasting so much time thinking about it was the irrational fear that someone might take that from him.

Will stored his fish and started the walk home, Winston at his heels. Part of the reason he had bought this house in the middle of nowhere was because it came with private access to the river. Fishing helped him to think clearly when his brain was filled and busy, as long as he didn't have to worry about someone else coming along.

Winston was Will's only dog who could be calm and well behaved for long enough to come fishing with him. The others would all want to play in the water or run off into the woods to chase a rabbit after the first hour. Winston just watched Will patiently, the same way he sometimes did while Will made food. Will had been glad to have the company.

As they neared the house, Winston's ears perked up and he moved closer to Will. Will frowned curiously, and looked toward the house as they broke through the treeline.

A Bentley was pulling up the drive.

Will's heart skipped in his chest and he smiled.

Hannibal had come to see him.

Will watched as the taller man stepped from his car, and he lifted a hand in greeting. Hannibal saw him and lifted his own hand in return. Neither of them called to the other, Hannibal being much too proper to shout and Will being too anxious to risk being too far away and either not heard or not understood, but they were comfortable with silence between them. It didn't matter.

Winston left Will's side briefly in order to sniff Hannibal, but returned once he was satisfied.

"Did you call ahead?" Will asked once he was within easy earshot, expecting the answer to be yes, "I didn't have reception."

Hannibal smiled and nodded in confirmation.

"I know better than to arrive unannounced on your day off, but I thought you might not mind some company this evening," he said, "forgive me if that was presumptuous."

Will grinned.

"Not at all," he said, "would you like to stay for dinner?"

Will lifted his cooler of fish, praying Hannibal hadn't brought food with him tonight.

Hannibal's smile grew, and the corners of his eyes crinkled in that way they did sometimes. Will liked it very much.

"I would love to," Hannibal said, "I have not brought an offering this time. I hope that is not a deal breaker."

Will laughed, feeling pretty good from his fishing trip, and now getting to see Hannibal.

“Now you have to watch the dogs while I change,” he said, heading to the door.

Hannibal looked honestly wary, following at a distance.

“They are well behaved,” he said, “but what exactly are my responsibilities?”

Will grinned.

“I'm mostly kidding. They’ll be fine, but they’ll keep *you* out of trouble.”

He opened the door and let the dogs out. They swarmed him, then began inspecting Hannibal once more. Will squatted down and petted them each.

“You guys show Hannibal the backyard,” Will said, then stood and motioned for them to go around. He looked at Hannibal again and smiled sheepishly. “Go ahead around. I’ll be out in a minute. Sorry again for making us eat outside.”

Hannibal shook his head, turning to follow the pack around the house with a smile.

“Not at all, Will,” he said, and was gone.

Will huffed a soft sigh and headed inside to change out of his waders. Winston stayed with him, making Will wonder exactly how smart a dog could be. Winston seemed to know and understand more than any other dog Will had met. It was strange, but comforting for him.

Winston waited by the back door as Will changed and then gathered what he would need to make dinner. He had a table and everything outside already, because he liked to eat out there when the weather was nice. He didn’t have any wine, but he filled a pitcher with water and hoped that would work. He doubted Hannibal would actually be that picky, despite his appearances.

Chapter End Notes

Everyone clap if Lirette is your favorite old man. <3 I hope you're all enjoying him. I sure am.

Up next: Hannibal opens up, offering a part of himself in return for all the pieces Will has offered.

23

Chapter Summary

Dinner date by lamplight. And fireflies, because I couldn't not.
Hannibal opens up about his past. At least somewhat.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will opened the door and let Winston out first, then followed. Hannibal was making himself at home as Will had hoped, sitting in one of the wicker chairs and watching the dogs play.

He looked like some kind of dream, just then, as if Will was a regular person who had married a handsome doctor, and this was a common occurrence for them. As if this was where they both belonged.

Hannibal looked up at Will as he shut the door, smiling in a way that made Will's heart flutter in that strange, pleasant way.

"What a treat it will be to sample your cooking after having the pleasure of cooking for you so often," Hannibal said warmly.

Will huffed a soft, nervous laugh. He set the pitcher on the table and lit a few hanging lamps, knowing the sun would be setting fairly soon.

"I hope you like fish," he said, "I'm not quite as accomplished a cook as you are, but I get along."

Hannibal nodded.

"I have every faith in you, Will," he said.

The way he said it made Will feel like he was talking about more than food, but he couldn't really think of any other context which that phrase would make sense in.

Will smiled nervously and began setting up, cleaning and gutting the fish as the coals in the grill heated. He put aside the guts and heads from the fish, planning to add them to the next batch of dog food. He didn't say anything for a while as he worked, absorbed in his task and finding it a bit strange to have a human audience. It was different from his dogs.

Hannibal's eyes were warm and soft, watching Will work with a pleasant passivity that made Will feel like he had been lonely for a long time without even knowing it. All his memories

of living here, all those pleasant days spent by himself, were now filtered through the context of this newly discovered loneliness.

“Do you fish often?” Hannibal asked as Will put the fish on the grill, the meat sizzling with the heat.

Will shrugged and prepped some vegetables to go on the grill as well.

“Not as often as I’d like to,” he admitted, “work keeps me busy, and I have bad days where I can’t leave the house, but when I get the chance, it’s a nice way to relax.”

Hannibal nodded.

“It is good that you have things like this in your life,” he said, “fishing and your dogs will keep you active and busy, without causing stress. An idle mind breeds dark thoughts.”

Will smiled wryly.

“My mind is never idle, but it breeds more dark thoughts than I care for,” he said.

Hannibal tipped his head.

“How have your dreams been since we last spoke?” he asked.

Will sighed, turning the fish on the grill.

“They’re just as bad as ever,” he said, “when I have them. I’ve had a few days without nightmares recently, but mostly it’s all the same.”

Hannibal nodded. He didn’t ask anything else, and Will had known he wouldn’t. Hannibal had brought it up so Will would have the opportunity to say more, but he wasn’t going to ask him to do so. It was up to Will.

Will plated up the food and brought the plates over to the table. Hannibal smiled and praised the food in appearance and aroma, then they began to eat.

Will decided he was ready to talk about it.

“I don’t always remember all of it,” he confessed, then shook his head, “I mean, I try not to. It was a long time being trapped in that basement, the worst day of my life every day. I learned how to block stuff out.”

Hannibal was listening quietly, his utensils still and silent on his plate. Will appreciated him not interrupting. He had begun to tell this to a therapist once, and she had stopped him here to assure him this was normal. Hannibal didn’t do that.

“But it’s all still there, in my head,” Will continued, “and when I sleep, all the defenses come down. All the worst parts, the things I try not to remember, they come back. I live through them all over again. It’s hard to do what you said to, because they aren’t only nightmares. They’re memories. Things I try to erase or ignore. They were real.”

Hannibal nodded, and Will thought maybe he actually understood what he was saying. Hannibal was the first person to ever make Will feel like he was actually understood. That was the only reason he had even been able to say any of this.

They were both silent for a long moment, comfortable in the presence of the other and thoughtful. Both of them considering what had been said, and how to go forward from there.

At length, the silence was broken, but in a way that surprised Will.

“If it will not bother you, I would like to tell you about something from when I was young,” Hannibal said, and there was a sincere sadness in his voice, “something I have touched on before.”

The sadness in Hannibal’s voice wasn’t for Will, which made him nod gently in a bid for him to continue.

Hannibal didn’t say anything right away, staring at the tree line and remembering, possibly thinking of how best to start.

“If it becomes too much, and you would like me to stop, all you need do is tell me,” Hannibal said.

Will nodded again, but he had the feeling he wouldn’t. Even if it was too much, he would hear all of it.

Maybe Hannibal knew that, or had some idea, because he waited another moment before he began.

“When I was eight years old, I lived in Lithuania with my family. My parents, and my younger sister. Mischa.”

Will hadn’t known Hannibal had any siblings. He didn’t have a personality that easily aligned with the idea of any typical sibling dynamic, at least the way he presented. He was mostly enigmatic, even to Will.

Will didn’t say anything, though, respecting Hannibal’s tale as Hannibal always did for him.

“That winter was bitterly cold, and stormed without stop. We were unable to leave the hunting lodge, and our food began to dwindle. My parents kept a bright facade for us children, but I knew they were worried. We wouldn’t last at that rate.”

Hannibal paused, still staring out at the trees, but not seeing them. He was treading down the path of his past, and Will could tell it was not all sunny and pleasant. This was what Hannibal kept locked in the very center of his mind, never forgotten and always far too easy to access.

Even Hannibal had something he would rather forget or erase.

“There was an accident one day that took both my parents, leaving both us children alone in the lodge. That might have been the worst of it, if not for the hungry men.”

Will was horrified and rapt. Hannibal's parents had died, yet that was not the point of the story. It had only been the context for whatever horror followed. Will was afraid to even hypothesize about what might come next.

"At the start, the men were not so bad. They largely ignored us, pillaging the cabin for our meager food stores. What frightened me more at that time was the cough that had taken Mischa. She had difficulty breathing at times, and I felt there was nothing I could do to help her."

Hannibal went quiet again for a long time, his eyelashes glittering with tears he didn't shed. Will wondered if Hannibal had ever told anyone else this story. If he had, Will thought it had been very long ago, when it might have still been somewhat fresh. This was opening old wounds.

The sun had gone down, but the lamps Will had turned on gave them enough light to see by. Fireflies began to shimmer in and out of existence in the grass. The dogs had all settled down comfortably nearby, only Winston directly at Will's feet. The night was quiet, though alive with the soft sounds of nature.

Will was able to stare at Hannibal openly, admiring the way he looked in the soft light. Hannibal was too far away in his mind to notice or care. He looked like a god or a dream, highlighted as he was and handsome in his grief. Will wondered if everyone looked more attractive when they were in pain, or if that would be uniquely Hannibal's, as many things were.

"I loved my sister above all else," Hannibal said at last, his voice soft and pained, though steady, "she had large, doe eyes, and hair like spider's silk. I had worried her speech was stunted."

Hannibal's lips twitched at what he must have thought a touch of irony.

"She did not survive that winter, and I was placed into an orphanage. I was there for years before my uncle learned what had happened and sent for me to join him in Paris."

Hannibal closed his eyes and pressed his lips together against what must have been a painful memory. Will could relate. Winston stood, and in a move that shocked Will completely, walked to Hannibal and put his head in Hannibal's lap. Hannibal opened his eyes and smiled sadly down at the dog, setting one hand in the fur between Winston's ears in a gesture of gratitude.

"I was mute for those years, apart from when I would scream at night, remembering what had happened. It took a long time for me to speak again, and longer still for the dreams to stop plaguing me."

Hannibal turned to Will, looking at him for the first time since he had started the story. Will forced his gaze down, looking at what remained of his dinner.

Will wouldn't say he was sorry. Though it was on the tip of his tongue, that platitude that years of southern raising had drilled into him, he wouldn't say it. He knew how hollow and

empty those words felt, and that they never did what they were supposed to. For someone dealing with pain and loss, those words only made them feel more alone.

“I think you and I have much more in common than you thought at first, do you not agree, Will?” Hannibal asked, a sad smile in his voice that made Will meet his gaze again.

“You can’t go back there,” he said, “to your home. How do you do it? No one would know.”

Hannibal’s smile became more genuine, then, and he reached out to take Will’s hand. Will let him.

“All the halls of my mind palace are not lovely,” he said fervently, “there are shadows and places where the floors have rotted through. I do what I can to keep those wings locked, and build pleasant rooms around them. I would like to help you do the same, if you will let me.”

Will couldn’t have refused, even if he had wanted to. Hannibal’s eyes were dark and fathomless in the low light, like the ocean at night. If Will had thought he was only halfway in love with Hannibal before, this was the moment he fell the rest of the way. He couldn’t imagine life without Hannibal in it, and didn’t want to. This was the territory in which things got honestly dangerous for him.

“Let’s do it,” Will said, and Hannibal smiled brilliantly.

Chapter End Notes

cheers Hannibal is being open and honest! (ulterior motive or not, he's still telling Will something that makes him vulnerable)
And Winston has warmed up to him. At least a little.

Up next: Will has a dream that isn't a nightmare, but definitely stresses him out. Jack comes calling.

24

Chapter Summary

Will has a dream that really messes with him, Jack asks for help, and a flashback.

Who prays over us when we sleep?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal's fingers slid into Will's hair, his eyes warm and dark. His other hand appeared at Will's waist, pulling him close. Will felt his entire body light up with electricity at the touch, and he turned his face into Hannibal's hand. He could smell Hannibal's skin, and it was nice.

"You allow me to touch you, but you still do not touch me," Hannibal said, "are you afraid, or merely selfish?"

Hannibal traced his thumb along Will's lower lip, and Will realized.

It was a dream. This was a dream.

That was strange, because Will didn't usually dream about anything other than the Hell of his past. He remembered one, recently, that Hannibal had also been in, but it had been short, and he hadn't known he was in a dream. This was not a nightmare, and he was aware.

"If this is a dream, you are free to experience it without the burden of guilt," Hannibal said, leaning in and pressing his lips gently to Will's.

Will's body jolted at the sensation, but he reached out and gripped the fabric of Hannibal's suit, pulling him even closer.

Will felt as if his skin was buzzing, and he had to keep reminding himself it was a dream. It felt so real, Hannibal felt so solid and warm against him. Hannibal's hands were confident and sure as they began to roam over Will's body.

Will pulled back, shaking his head. It was difficult to clear it, probably mostly due to it being a dream.

"Hannibal thinks of me as a friend," he said, hating himself for the words at the same time as he felt he had to stop this, "he trusts me."

The Hannibal in the dream smiled the way the real Hannibal did when he found something funny.

“And you can trust that *I* will not tell him how you feel,” he said, then leaned in close and spoke in Will’s ear, “what if he feels the same way? What if he wants you as I do?”

Will felt as if a fire had just blazed to life inside him. He couldn’t stop himself, even if he had wanted to. He pulled Hannibal back into a kiss, consuming and devouring in turn. The next time he met Hannibal’s eyes in the dream, they flashed red at him.

—

Will woke up, his heart beating rapidly. But he wasn’t out of breath or frightened. The feeling of Hannibal’s hands on him lingered even now, into the waking world.

After a moment of near euphoria, bathing in the memory of the dream, Will felt reality crash down around him, bringing with it a crushing guilt.

Hannibal was his friend. His only real friend other than Lirette. It was a betrayal to even feel this way about him, and now Will was having dreams about it. His mind was betraying him once again, making his life all the more difficult and miserable. How was he supposed to face Hannibal after this? He couldn’t avoid Hannibal. Hannibal was too smart. He would know Will was trying to avoid him, and would probably connect it to his dreams. But what if he thought Will was afraid of him? What if he thought Will had had a nightmare about him or something?

Will couldn’t avoid him. But what was he supposed to do, then?

Will ran a hand over his face, staring up at the ceiling as the sun rose over the horizon. He would just have to pretend this hadn’t happened. Try to forget the dream entirely, and push away his spiraling infatuation with Hannibal. Try to act normal around him, as if they were just friends.

Will only had one friend, and he couldn’t afford to mess it up.

—

“Are you ready to help with another case?” Jack asked hesitantly.

Will could get used to Jack acting like his help was a privilege instead of a right. At the same time, he knew he wouldn’t be given the chance to. After a couple cases at most, Jack would be back to his usual, demanding ways. If Will played his cards wrong, this wouldn’t even last to the end of the conversation.

Will sighed softly.

“I can try, Jack,” he said, “but if I need out, you have to let me go. I don’t know how I’ll handle it.”

Jack nodded as if he was willing to do that.

Will knew he was, at least for a while. After some time, he would want to see an improvement in Will’s work. Either he would have to push the boundaries he had set, or he’d

have to catch them faster.

“Could you come to a scene today?” Jack asked.

Will glanced at the clock. He had half an hour before his first lecture of the day. He could guess Jack had arranged for someone to substitute for him, if he thought Will would come.

“What kind of scene?” Will asked carefully, keeping himself and his things well out of Jack’s reach.

Jack was being very careful, himself, this morning. He must have realized he no longer had a foot in the door, and needed Will to open it a crack.

“Motel room,” he said, “It’s not small or enclosed, it’s well lit. Look at it, and decide if you’ll go in. You can just look from outside the door if you want.”

Jack must have been far less than satisfied with Alana’s help, if he was this desperate for Will back. Perhaps it had been her optimism, blurring her perception of the tragedies. Maybe she just hadn’t quite made connections the way or at the speed at which Jack wanted. Whatever it was, Jack wanted Will back in the saddle.

“Alright, Jack,” Will said, “but someone needs to give a lecture on bite marks.”

Jack’s shoulders dropped in relief, and he nodded.

“Alana Bloom agreed to,” he said, “I think she fits much better in a teacher role than an investigator.”

Will wondered if that was an example of Jack’s unconscious chauvinism, or if he had real reason to think so based on her performance. Will thought she was smart enough to do either, but her kind nature would definitely endear her to students. That same quality could be helpful in an interrogation, at times.

It really depended on what Alana wanted to do, he supposed. And she already chose to teach on a regular basis, so Will guessed she had made her decision in that regard.

“Alright, Jack,” Will said, “but I mean every word. The moment I say I want out, I’m out.”

Jack nodded. Will could tell he was in a hurry, or wanted to be. He didn’t like standing around and discussing the details of how he was to behave. He didn’t like the restrictions to begin with, and talking about them upset him.

Will wondered how he had gotten so far in the FBI if he had always acted this way about the rules.

So Will went with Jack to the crime scene.

—

Will scurried to class, careful to stay at the edge of the hall and duck around anyone who was in the way. He had gotten very good at not even brushing up against anyone in the hall, and avoiding eye contact was something more than half the student body seemed to do.

He had missed a lot of school. He was in high school now, which was strange and new. Some of the other students gave him strange looks, but everyone basically steered clear of him. No one knew what he had done. Lirette had made sure of it. So at least there weren't people whispering about the feral boy who had torn a man's face apart with his hands.

Will had to get to his psych class. It was his favorite, next to biology, and the teacher didn't care if he didn't speak up during class. She let him be quiet, and alone. She didn't even make him work in groups.

Someone bumped into Will, stumbling against him and sending him hurtling into the row of lockers. He ended up on his hands and knees on the floor, tense and frightened.

"Oh my god. Are you alright?"

There was a girl. Will recognized her shoes. She was named Misty, and she was a year older than him. She was kneeling down in front of him.

And reaching out to him.

The moment her fingers touched the sleeves of his shirt, Will shot backward, his eyes wide and his breathing coming hard and fast. He saw flashes of the man's face, torn and bleeding, eyeless.

"Don't touch me don't touch me don't touch me," he said, trying to gasp in another breath. He bit his lip so hard it began to bleed, and wrapped his arms around himself in a desperate attempt to soothe his terror.

Soon, there were teachers gathered around, and the school nurse. Whenever one of them tried to touch him, he would pull away and repeat his chant, barely able to get enough breath to speak. He couldn't breathe, and it felt like his chest was going to explode. He smelled rotting fruit, and he was sure he was going to die.

"Mister Graham. Yes, this is Mark Blakely. I'm afraid your son is having an attack."

The principle. He had called Will's dad.

Will's vision went dark as all the adults looked down at him with pity.

—

Angels to watch over him while he slept.

Will stepped into the motel room, drinking it all in. The bodies didn't disgust him as he knew they should. He had never had that reaction to death. He was sometimes frightened or horrified by what he saw, but never disgusted.

It would have been comforting to someone who believed in God and angels. To think you had a pair specifically for you, to guard your rest.

Will found no comfort in this scene, though. If God was real, he had abandoned Will long ago. There were no angels watching over him.

The whole scene painted a pathetic picture. A man who was afraid, and desperate for divine intervention. Creating angels from sinners to protect him while he tried to figure out what he was meant to do. Perhaps he believed there was some kind of divine calling in the cards for him. Maybe that was more frightening than believing there was no God at all. Will could understand that. Thinking that God had not abandoned you, but instead was directly causing all your pain, was a terrifying concept.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter feels a bit disjointed to me, but I wrote it that way for a reason. It's not perfect, but it's functional.

Up next: the boys discuss theology. That's basically it. I really like it. Hopefully you will too.

25

Chapter Summary

Will discovers something about himself, while trying to understand the angelmaker.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"He's afraid of dying in his sleep," Will told Hannibal, "he has a brain tumor, constantly changing the way he thinks, and he's afraid that's what God wants."

Hannibal considered that for a long moment as his hands worked. They rarely met at his office anymore, though Will still referred to their conversations as sessions when talking to Jack. Tonight, Will was trying hard not to think about the strange dream he had had concerning Hannibal. It was hard not to think about it, because he still wondered.

"Do you believe in God, Will?" he asked.

Will grimaced.

"No," he answered without hesitation, "I was never very religious, but any concept of God shattered while I was in that basement. There was no God in that place."

Hannibal looked up and studied Will, his gaze curious but not judgemental.

Will had the feeling Hannibal had a likewise interesting relationship with religion. He sometimes said things that implied he believed in God, or some form of one, but he did not seem particularly prone to worship. Will wondered if he ever prayed.

"Because he did not save you, or because he let you be taken there in the first place?" Hannibal asked.

Will shook his head.

"People believe in a God that is cruel or indifferent," he said, "but the core of their belief is his *presence* . They can feel him, he gives them comfort, he answers their prayers. In some way, he is there. Watching, and ready to intervene should the need or desire arise."

Will didn't often talk to people about religion, because he ended up making people angry, or they weren't the kind of person he liked to be around. He didn't have anything against religious people, really. He could think someone was wrong without thinking they were stupid or actively malicious. As long as they didn't preach at him, Will was happy to cohabitate.

“When I say there was no God in that place, I mean he was not present. Not watching. I did not feel him at any point, even as I prayed for help or comfort. There was no comfort, and there is still no peace for me. That is why I do not believe in him.”

Hannibal nodded, and Will was once again struck by the impression that he actually understood. It made sense for him to understand, now that Will knew some of what he had been through, but it still managed to come as a surprise. Will wondered if Hannibal had felt a similar way about this for a time before assuming his current belief.

Had Hannibal prayed for Mischa?

“Do you find it difficult to empathize with this angelmaker because of his belief?” Hannibal asked at length.

Will shrugged.

“Maybe some,” he said, “but it’s not as bad as it could be. I can understand faith more than some things. There’s not really anything in the way, like there was at the beginning with Hobbs.”

Hannibal tossed some meat and vegetables into a pan on the stove, where they sizzled and filled the air with a mouthwatering aroma.

“Your anger does not become an obstacle?” he asked after a moment.

Will frowned and considered it.

His anger . He hadn’t realized he felt angry, but now he could see that he did. Everything he had said about God, and everything he thought about it, were steeped in anger. Anger at what had happened, and anything that had made it possible. He was angry.

And now that he thought about it, he was angry with the killer. Angry about his faith and pursuit of the divine, while he was going through the worst thing in his life. Angry that he might be finding comfort in his faith. Angry that the anomaly in his head might be offering him some peace or answers in the guise of God.

“I guess it might,” Will said softly.

Hannibal peered at Will curiously. Will wondered what kinds of things he saw when he looked that way. With anyone else, he would have known exactly what they saw when they looked at Will. They had been telling him since he was sixteen. But he didn’t think he could completely predict Hannibal’s thoughts. Every time Will had thought he knew exactly what Hannibal would say, he had been surprised.

“Allow your anger to motivate you, Will,” Hannibal said, predictably unpredictable, “take hold of it. Allow it to give you power over your fear and doubt.”

Will’s frown deepened and he looked up at Hannibal inquisitively.

That wasn't the kind of thing a typical psychiatrist would say. Hannibal was not encouraging Will to let go of his anger or work past it. It was almost like he was encouraging Will to let it fester and grow, despite how it could corrupt him.

But there was some relief in that as well. Hannibal was giving him permission to be angry. Telling him it was alright, that it was not a failing on his part that he had not been able to forgive. No one had told him that in a long time. Even Lirette had told Will he would need to let go of his anger someday, so he could overcome it. It had been acceptable for him to be angry for a while, but holding onto it was wrong.

Not to Hannibal, though.

"I don't understand you," Will said with a sigh, running a hand over his face, "everyone I've ever met has tried the exact opposite approach to everything than you do. Why?"

Hannibal furrowed his own brow and considered it for a long moment. Will thought maybe he hadn't been clear enough. If Hannibal didn't understand, he would let Will know. So Will just waited.

"I often find myself giving you counsel that is contrary to what I would tell any of my patients," Hannibal said thoughtfully, "perhaps it is because I believe you will benefit more from a slightly unorthodox approach. I think you and I are just alike, so I often tell you what has helped me, rather than what I have been taught to say. Does that upset you?"

Will huffed a soft laugh. It was funny to him how often Hannibal asked him things like that. He was always concerned about how Will was reacting to anything he did or said. Will thought part of it was his concern as a friend, and part was his curiosity as a psychiatrist.

"'Course not," Will said, "I've tried therapy before, if you recall, and it's never really worked. For the first time, I think I'm seeing some actual improvement. I'm just curious about it, because of how strange it is to me."

Hannibal smiled.

"I'm pleased to be as unpredictable as I find you to be," he said, "we are both mysteries to one another."

Will studied Hannibal for a moment.

"Are you a mystery that wants to be solved?" he wondered aloud, feeling like this was some kind of strange and convoluted code between them, but he wasn't always sure they were on the same page about it.

Hannibal's eyes sparkled when he looked up at Will. It was the kind of look that twisted Will's stomach into knots, because of his newly strengthened obsessive infatuation with the man. It sometimes made him wonder if maybe his feelings were returned.

"I've been hoping someone may turn up who is capable of it," Hannibal said, "I've spent so many years building walls, it's natural for me to want to find out if anyone is clever enough

to climb over."

Will felt his face flush a bit. The fact that Hannibal thought he had the potential to be that person gave him more hope for his own inconvenient feelings. If it was at all possible for him to really get somewhere with Hannibal, this was evidence in support of it. He tried not to get his hopes up, of course, but his mind was constantly begging him to interpret the evidence. To make a move of some kind.

But Will was too afraid of losing a friend. He only had one.

"How will you catch your angelmaker?" Hannibal asked, when it became clear Will wasn't going to say anything in response. He didn't seem perturbed by his companion's silence. "You understand his faith, and your own anger about it. How will you catch him?"

Will sighed and shook his head.

"Part of me thinks we won't have to," he said, "he's dying, and he knows it. Maybe he'll die before we find him."

Hannibal considered that. He was placing food onto a pair of china plates, and Will watched his sure and steady hands work as the silence spun out between them like a silver thread of fate.

"If one believes in God, and fears he is responsible for all your suffering, what might you do as the end nears?" Hannibal asked, and Will looked up at him with wide eyes.

"He's going to kill himself," Will realized, "take his death into his own hands. I'll bet he even crawls away to be alone, the way a cat does. Somewhere he knows, though. Maybe somewhere significant."

"Perhaps somewhere he had a religious experience," Hannibal added.

Will nodded, plunging his hand into his pocket for his phone. He had to tell Jack about this right away. Before he forgot to tell him at all.

"Sorry," he said, checking another pocket when the first one resulted in nothing, "I have to call Jack real quick. This is huge, actually. I didn't think he was self-destructive, and this isn't exactly self-destruction in the regular way. He's taking back his agency. Making a choice against God. If God wants him to suffer, he's going to stop it early. He's defying God."

Will finally found his phone and glanced up at Hannibal, who nodded encouragingly.

"Of course, Will, do what you must," Hannibal said, "I will wait for you."

Will offered a grateful smile and stepped out of the kitchen, opting for the front hall instead of the dining room. Despite the changes in there Hannibal had made to make him more comfortable, it was still too formal for him.

Chapter End Notes

Yay! Learning new things about himself through understanding serial killers!

Up next: Will has a nice evening with Hannibal. Then, he has a bad day.

26

Chapter Summary

Will Graham and the terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day.
He's not going to have a fun time in this chapter. Sorry :/

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“What do you mean?” Jack demanded.

He didn’t sound happy, but Will didn’t know why he was upset this time. It was rare to catch Jack in a good mood, and Will had stopped bothering to find out what the problem was every time.

“He’s going to kill himself,” Will said again, too excited by his epiphany to let Jack upset him, “He’ll go somewhere that’s familiar to him. Possibly somewhere he had a religious experience, but definitely somewhere something important happened to him.

Jack huffed a harsh sigh, and Will didn’t understand why he would be upset about this. This was big, and would help them catch the killer.

“Why do you think he’s going to kill himself?” Jack asked.

“Because he feels like God has forsaken him,” Will said, trying not to sound condescending, “he feels abandoned, so he wants to defy God. He’s taking his own death away from God.”

Another sound from Jack’s end, and Will thought he understood. That was good.

“How come you’re just figuring this out now?” Jack asked, and Will realized why he might be upset. Jack was probably at home with his wife.

“I’m with Doctor Lecter,” he said, slightly deflated, “he’s been helping me understand the killer.”

Jack sighed again. Will got the feeling Jack wanted him to be completely focused on getting to the point where he could be active in the field. He would be glad Will was working on the case, but unhappy Will still wouldn’t interview suspects.

Bitterness crawled up Will’s throat again. Jack wanted Will to work on his terms, rather than the ones Hannibal and Will had drafted to protect Will both physically and mentally. Jack wouldn’t be happy until Will was like his loyal bloodhound, ready and raring to go.

Will tried not to think that way about his boss. He knew Jack thought he just wanted what was best.

“Alright,” Jack said, “we’re bringing a few people in for interviews tomorrow. This should help us know what to ask. Is there anything else?”

Will thought for a moment, trying to remember if there had been anything else he needed to tell Jack.

“No,” he said at length, “If I figure anything else out I’ll let you know. Have a good night, Jack.”

The call ended and Will walked back into the kitchen. Hannibal had set the table and was pouring them each a glass of wine. He looked up at Will and tipped his head curiously.

“You are upset,” he said, an observation rather than a question. It seemed he knew Will well enough to tell when he was upset.

Will huffed softly and dropped down into his seat.

“Jack would like to stop paying you, I think,” he said.

Hannibal raised an eyebrow, his eyes shining with amusement as he took his own seat.

“I was unaware his budget was so restricted,” he said smoothly.

Will huffed a laugh.

“He doesn’t want to need you,” Will elaborated, “he was hoping you would cure me so I could go out and face down the killers without fear, like an FBI poster boy.”

Hannibal smiled.

“As a man in the Behavioral Analysis Unit, I would have expected him to know better,” he said.

Will shrugged and took a mouthful of wine.

“He doesn’t realize that’s what he wanted. If you asked him, he would say he just wants to see me get better. What he doesn’t realize is that I *have* been getting better.”

Hannibal nodded thoughtfully. Will thought he caught a flash of annoyance in his expression, but not the anger he had thought he might see. Either Hannibal wasn’t as upset this time, or he was doing a much better job at hiding it.

“Recovery is not a linear progression,” Hannibal said, parroting nearly every psychiatrist Will had ever talked to, “Jack is more likely to notice when you take another step back, because it angers him. When you improve, he is unlikely to even recognize the change.”

Will nodded, feeling his own anger towards Jack flare hotter for a moment. It wasn't fair of Jack. He wasn't even trying to recognize the work Will was putting into his own recovery.

It was getting harder to ignore

If Will didn't know better, he might suspect Hannibal was encouraging his anger, trying to drive a wedge between Will and Jack.

"Hopefully, I can just forget him for a while," Will said with a wry smile.

Hannibal returned the smile, his quite a bit more warm and genuine than Will's, and nodded.

"Tonight, you may relax and rest in the knowledge that you have come to understand your angelmaker. He will be caught," Hannibal said, lifting his glass.

Will couldn't stifle a grin, feeling ridiculous but happy as he raised his own glass and touched it to Hannibal's. It was something he would never have imagined himself doing. It was a frivolity of the upper class. But Hannibal made it seem natural.

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Will woke up, covered in sweat and unable to breathe. Winston hopped up and pressed him into the mattress, but it took a long time for his chest to loosen. He knew at once that he was not going to be having a good day.

A few hours later, Will managed to pry himself off the mattress. He canceled classes for the day, knowing his students would be grateful for the extra free time and then neglect to think about it at all after that. They wouldn't worry about him.

Will fixed himself some toast, enough food to make the pain in his stomach take a few hours off, but not really satisfy his hunger. He also drank a cup of water, but not enough to satisfy him. He just wanted to float for a while. The toast tasted like nothing, and he was fine with that.

His sensory neutrality worked, for a while. He lay on his bed and watched the ceiling as the room slowly brightened. He didn't know how long he lay there, really, because he hadn't checked the time before laying down again. The sun was full up by the time one of the dogs began to whine, prompting Will to roll out of bed and open the door for them.

The pack charged out in a swarm into the yard, all pleased and excited to be outside for the first time that day. Will watched them from the doorway, too paralyzed with fear to go with them. He felt as if there were eyes everywhere, watching him and waiting. He knew there wasn't anything to be afraid of. He knew the dogs would alert him to anyone that came near to the house or the property. That was part of the appeal of having so many. They had warned him in advance when Hannibal had come, so he knew they would let him know.

That all didn't stop him from being afraid.

That was the thing about problems like this. Logic didn't fix them. It didn't matter how smart you were, or how unreasonable the fear was. The fear remained, festered, and grew. The only

way to defeat it was to stop feeding it.

The way Will did that was different than most would recommend. He knew that. For most people, going about their days as if they were not afraid was how they starved the beast. Not giving into their fear or letting it rule them. For Will, he had to be alone. Being around other people made him more anxious, so the best way for him to get over the bad days was to spend them alone, and safe.

His agoraphobia was an unfortunate side effect of the bad days. It meant he couldn't even go fishing though he didn't have classes. It made him feel like there wasn't much point in anything. He wished he could close his eyes and skip directly to the next day. When he wasn't too petrified to leave his house. He wanted to skip the part where he was afraid.

But that would be skipping half his life or more. He was almost always afraid.

When the dogs had all done their business, Will called them back in and locked the door. He made sure they had food and water, then curled up in his bed again. He stared at the ceiling as light traveled across it.

—

The dogs alerted sometime in the afternoon, and Will shot out of bed like he had been electrocuted. He ran to the window and peeked out from the corner, afraid of being seen by whoever was outside. He had just been working himself up to letting the dogs out again, and if this was a false alarm he would be too shaken to do so for another several hours.

A Bentley turned into Will's drive, and he felt his whole body give in to tremors.

It was Hannibal. Hannibal was coming to check on him. Jack had probably told him Will had missed work. If not, maybe it had been Alana, who surely would have heard about it or asked after him. She was the concerned and caring type.

Hannibal couldn't come in, and Will couldn't go out. This was literal Hell.

Will sat down on the floor and hugged his knees, his back against the door. He heard Hannibal exit the car and his feet crunch over gravel. The dogs woofed and yipped at the door, though Winston was pressing himself close to Will's side. Hannibal's footsteps stopped short of the porch, and Will felt his chest ache.

He would wait for Will's invitation to come any closer.

"Will?" Hannibal called, concern evident in his tone.

Will closed his eyes and wet his lips, his entire body trembling. He hated this.

"I'm here," he said, hoping Hannibal could hear him through the door.

There was a beat of silence, letting Will worry Hannibal hadn't heard. Then, Hannibal spoke again, filling Will with relief and shame.

“How are you feeling?”

Will let out a choked sob, his chest constricting painfully and making it feel like his heart was being crushed.

“Like I’m going to die,” he confessed, “I can’t breathe, and I can’t go outside. I’m dying.”

There was a gentle shifting outside the door, but Hannibal still didn’t step onto the porch. He was so respectful of Will’s boundaries. It sometimes made Will angry, because he just wanted to be able to be mad at Hannibal like he was with everyone else. It would be so much easier if he was really alone, and could be angry about it. It was worse that Hannibal understood and still wanted to be around Will.

“Is there anything I can do to help?” Hannibal asked.

Will huffed derisively, his chest constricting again. He began to run the nail of his thumb along his lower lip, scraping and hurting.

“I don’t know,” he admitted, “you can’t come in. What are you going to do from out there?”

There was another shift, and Will pressed his nail into his lip hard, hurting. He thought Hannibal had just sat down on the steps to the porch. Closer to Will, but not too close yet.

“I could tell you a story,” Hannibal offered, “Something to distract you from your fear. Or I could simply stay here, so you do not feel alone.”

Will pulled his nail hard against his lip. It stung, and he wondered how hard he would have to scrape to make himself bleed. He wondered what Hannibal would say.

“Or, you could talk,” Hannibal said thoughtfully, “tell me of a time before your fear. Of the child you were and who he dreamed to be. Or tell me whatever it is you need to.”

Will’s chest hitched with another sob, and tears stung his eyes as he listened. It reminded him of those days long ago with Lirette, where he was invited to sit in his chair and either talk or not. A period of time allotted for whatever Will needed it to be. He supposed therapists would like to say that was what sessions with them were meant to be, but Will had never met one who didn’t insist they do something with the time. Explore memories and traumas decided by the therapist.

But Hannibal was actually offering to let Will have that. The same way he allowed silences to go unfilled, and let Will step away if he ever came too close, and reminded Will of Cassie Boyle when he was unable to breathe.

“Could you talk for a while?” Will asked, pulling his lip into his mouth and pinching it between his canines, “I’ll probably want to talk later, probably I’ll need to, but I’d like it if you told me a story.”

There was a warmth in Hannibal’s voice when he responded, making Will picture his soft and secret smile.

“There were large, black swans that lived on our property when I was young,” he said, “Noble creatures, with elegance. But, as I’m sure you know, swans are temperamental and aggressive.”

Hannibal told Will all about the swans, and how he had tried to teach Mischa to spread her arms and make herself look bigger, holding branches out like great wings. He told Will how Mischa had either been too young or too frightened, and always insisted Hannibal be the one to assert dominance over the creatures in order that she may play without threat of attack. Hannibal’s voice was filled with genuine affection as he spoke of his sister, and Will thought he really hadn’t been terribly annoyed with her at the time. Even then, before he had any idea her existence would be softened by memory, he had truly adored her.

Chapter End Notes

Another peek into Hannibal's past, because I felt like Will deserved it, and he's really not having a good time.

Up next: Will's day gets marginally better, thanks to Hannibal. And, I tinker with the timeline a bit so we can get to something I've been waiting for. XD

27

Chapter Summary

Hannibal and Will learn a few things. Jack is watching his step.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

As the story went on, Will felt his chest loosening by degrees, and he even smiled. Somehow, Hannibal had once again known the way to help Will when Will hadn't even known himself. He really was too good to be true.

When Hannibal was finished, Will almost felt human again. It was his turn to talk, and he found that he could. More than that, he *needed* to tell Hannibal. Tell him about the time in the basement.

His nerves were still frayed, but he could talk. Having someone else know about it would help. For the first time ever, he truly believed that.

"He always taunted me," Will said, "He kept up on news of the search for me, but he never let me read the articles. He made me look at him, meet his eyes, and get as much as I could from that alone. He wouldn't answer my questions, if I asked. If I couldn't see it in his eyes, I didn't get it."

Will shuddered all over, and Winston pressed into his lap.

"One day, he came home excited. He had seen my daddy. My daddy had been leaving the house to put up new fliers with my face on them. It had been months already, and the police had started to lose hope. The man took a flier. He talked to my daddy. All while I was in the basement."

Will closed his eyes, feeling moisture on his lashes.

"I didn't know what my daddy looked like. I didn't know if he was healthy. I didn't know if he had also lost hope. The man wouldn't tell me. He was too excited. I didn't even get to eat before-"

Will cut off, gagging slightly. He wasn't sure he could go on. He didn't think he'd be able to get into the details, even with Hannibal. He didn't think he would ever be ready for that.

"He liked it when I was scared," Will choked out, "When I was upset. He liked it when I wasn't happy. It excited him. If I fought, he always had the chloroform. He always had the smell on him."

Hannibal didn't say anything, and Will wondered what he was thinking.

"He never called me by my name," Will said, "he always called me *little bird* . Because that was essentially all I was to him. A pet in a cage."

Will shuddered again.

"Our breakfast in Minnesota," Hannibal said slowly, and Will had expected he might bring it up, "I said Jack sees you as a bird with a broken wing."

Will huffed a laugh.

"Yeah. You can imagine my surprise when you said that," he said, "we had hardly gotten to know each other, and you were dredging up things like that without knowing it. That's why I changed the topic so quick."

"I apologize if that made you uncomfortable," Hannibal said, "though I am sure you will remind me there was no way for me to know."

Will smiled.

"You got it. I hadn't told you hardly anything at that point, so it wasn't your fault. Anyway, you were right. That's how Jack has seen me for a long time. I hadn't put words to it before, though."

Hannibal hummed in consideration, and Will wondered if he would get annoyed for not being allowed any closer.

"Has his perception of you changed?" Hannibal asked, "since you have begun to show improvement?"

Will considered it for a moment.

"I think so," he said, "At least, he knows he can't force me to do things anymore. He's using less blunt tactics to get my help."

There was another stretch of silence between them, and Will wondered what Hannibal was thinking. He wondered if Hannibal was trying to think of ways to counteract Jack's new tactics. Will thought he might be, and he was glad. Hannibal was always trying to help Will and prepare ideas for when Will would ask for his help.

"Jack found your angelmaker," Hannibal said.

Will froze, his eyes widening, then he took a deep breath.

"Was he alive?" he asked.

There was a pause before Hannibal answered.

"No."

Will smiled, despite himself. He could feel the relief the man must have felt, the power and agency. He had done what he had meant to, taken the choice out of God's hands. He had chosen the time and circumstances of his own death. Jack hadn't taken that from him.

"Tell me," Will said.

If he had asked that of Jack Crawford, or another psychiatrist, they would have been concerned about him. It was strange for him to want to know the details. They would see him as sensitive and vulnerable, wholly unprepared to face the horrors of such a thing, especially in his current state.

But Hannibal understood, perhaps not perfectly, but enough. He understood that a case like this would not hurt Will.

So Hannibal described the scene to Will in detail. Will closed his eyes and allowed his imagination to take hold. He didn't know if Hannibal had seen it himself, or only viewed pictures, but it didn't matter now. He said enough for Will.

The scene filled Will with a quiet sense of power. Elliot Buddish had done something, even though he had been forsaken by God. Even though everything had been working against him and he had felt trapped in his living Hell of pain and confusion.

If Elliot Buddish could do it, maybe so could Will.

Will would hesitate to say *that* , even to Hannibal. It sounded too self destructive. That wasn't what Will meant. He didn't mean that he could take control of his life by ending it. He just felt there was hope that there was a method of control he could cling to. One for each person, specifically, so one for him.

"Thank you, Hannibal," Will said, feeling much calmer now, "for staying. I don't know anyone else who would do that for me. And thank you for talking, and listening. I think it really helped."

"Of course, Will," Hannibal said warmly, "If you ever need my help, all you need do is ask."

And Will believed him.

—

Jack came by Will's classroom, and Will could see his sudden absence had spooked him again. He was going to tread carefully today, unless he forgot himself, which wasn't entirely unlikely.

"Did Doctor Lecter contact you yesterday?" Jack asked, finally standing far enough away Will didn't feel suffocated by him. He was afraid to step closer.

Though Jack was asking the question, Will didn't think he was the one who had talked to Hannibal the day before. Now that he really thought about it, he didn't think it had been Alana Bloom either. But who could it have been?

Beverly.

Will smiled when he realized. It screamed Beverly Katz. She of the no-nonsense tone and quick wit. Jack and Alana would have hedged around the issue while Beverly had cut through the bullshit and gone directly to the root of the thing. She would have told Hannibal flat out what was up, and how Jack and Alana were failing to deal with it. Only after the fact would she have told Jack it was over.

“Yeah,” Will said, “He’s doing his job, Jack. Making sure I can still serve your purposes.”

Jack winced a bit at that, and Will wondered if Hannibal had talked to him. He wondered if Jack had caught a glimpse of that burning anger Hannibal usually concealed. If he had, it would surprise Will if he ever had the courage to contradict Hannibal again.

“Did he tell you the case of the angelmaker has been closed?” Jack asked.

Will nodded.

“Elliot Buddish. Killed himself in a barn where he almost died as a kid. Made himself into an angel.”

Jack grimaced, clearly not pleased by the images. Will thought that was too bad. It meant Jack wasn’t likely to give him the pictures just because he wanted to see.

Maybe he would ask Beverly. He thought she might give them to him, even if she didn’t understand why he wanted them.

“Yeah. We found him thanks to you. You did good work, Will.”

Hannibal had definitely talked to Jack.

Will might have been upset by that if he thought Hannibal was doing it to protect Will. He thought that was part of it, but only a small part. He thought Hannibal did it because he was honestly and truly affronted by the way Jack handled people, Will included. It was an insult to his sensibilities. It was rude.

Hannibal was simply righting a wrong in the world, by shocking some sense into Jack every so often.

It was a bit strange to imagine them interacting, separately from Will. Sometimes he had a difficult time believing he existed in the perceptions of others when they were not immediately interacting. That was stupid, logically, but the impression was persistent.

“And you’re here to ask me to do it again,” Will guessed, “you have a new case you want me to look at.”

Jack let out a harsh sigh.

“Actually, it’s an old case that you’re probably familiar with. There’s been a development with the Chesapeake Ripper.”

Will frowned and looked up at Jack's tie.

"What kind of development?" he asked.

It had been three years since the Ripper had last struck, so it would be a huge chance for them if they had come back out of hiding.

"The director of the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane says he has him in custody. Has for three years, apparently."

Will felt himself pale, but not because he knew someone must have died. It was at the mention of the hospital, and the director. He knew Chilton, and refused to deal with him at all. It would not be good for them to be in the same room, and it would be much worse if Will had to go to the hospital. An entire building that felt like a basement.

But if it really was the Ripper, Will had to know.

"I won't go there," Will told Jack, "just to get that out of the way. But let me call Doctor Lecter. If he comes in, we can work on it together."

Jack seemed slightly confused, either by his willingness to work on the case or his specific request, but he was clearly more than happy to have Will help.

"Sure. Do what you have to. We'll be glad to have his help as well."

Will nodded. Seeing as Jack was paying Hannibal as a consultant, and he hadn't been very forthcoming with what Jack had wanted about Will, Jack would probably be glad to get some actual work out of him.

Jack left after securing a promise that Will would meet him in the labs when he was done talking to Hannibal. Will doubted there was anything in the labs to really look at, other than pictures. If Jack had thought Will would go, the scene would have been undisturbed so Will could see it as the killer left it. Will wondered if Hannibal would want to see it that way.

"Will," Hannibal said warmly when he answered the phone, "What can I do for you?"

Will couldn't help but smile at the sound of Hannibal's voice. He was down bad.

"Actually, it's more something you can do for Jack," he said, then reconsidered, "No. That's a lie. I want you to do it for me."

Hannibal had a clear note of curiosity in his voice when he replied.

"I will help in any way I can," he said, "what is it Jack is asking of us?"

Will scraped his thumb nail under his lip, noting Hannibal's use of the first person plural. He hoped this wouldn't be too much to ask.

"I need you to deal with Chilton. He thinks he has the Chesapeake Ripper under his care. There will be a scene. I can't go there, and I can't talk to him. If you can go, then come and

tell me everything, we can clear this whole thing up."

Will waited, nearly praying to hear the answer he wanted. He thought it might be too much to ask, but he knew Hannibal wouldn't hesitate to tell him if it was. Hannibal didn't feel obligated to do whatever was asked of him, and withstood manipulation better than Will did.

"I would be happy to help," Hannibal said, and Will felt his chest loosen. He hadn't even realized his breathing had been restricted. "Shall I meet you and Jack at his office so we can discuss how we should go forward? I imagine Jack should be with me when I go to the hospital."

Will smiled, nodding to himself. He would be glad to see Hannibal in person before he went. It would be easier to explain what he would need to be able to tell Will when he came back, and he was right that Jack would want to be there.

"Meet us at the labs, actually," he said, "that's where I'll be, at least. I'll let you know if anything changes."

Hannibal hummed in agreement.

"We shall see each other soon, then."

Chapter End Notes

I know they were absolutely not this close to each other in the show. Just pretend. Sshhhhh. It's totally fine.

Up next: Hannibal not-so subtly stakes his claim on Will in front of everyone. Will doesn't notice, because he's completely absorbed in the case.

28

Chapter Summary

The team gets started with the Ripper case, and/or Abel Gideon. Will gets some time to himself to think.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jack had given Will a stack of files when he got to the lab. Each of the Ripper's murders were there. Pictures as well as detailed write ups of evidence found and any connections they had hesitantly made through the investigation. He ordered Will to become intimately familiar with all of it, probably because he felt Will had to compensate for his inability to go to the fresh scene. Will accepted the task easily, glad he wouldn't have to ask for any of this later, because he knew he would want it.

Jack pointed out one specific scene he claimed would be particularly important to know well, since apparently this new killing was a repeat.

That struck a sour chord in Will's mind, but he didn't say anything about it yet. He didn't expect the Ripper to repeat a killing after the first one. They were usually unique artworks. Will would wait and see, though. He had to get into the Ripper's mind before he could be sure of anything.

Hannibal arrived, and Will was glad. Jack immediately stopped saying anything to Will that could be construed as a demand, and told Hannibal what they would do. He wanted to leave as soon as they could, but Hannibal insisted on having a moment to speak with Will before they left. He pulled Will aside, a hand gently on Will's arm.

"You are certain you want to work on this case?" Hannibal asked softly, "I understand if there are components that make it uncomfortable for you, Frederick being the least of these. You are allowed to refuse, no matter what Jack may say."

Will huffed a soft laugh and shook his head.

"No. I want to do it. If the Ripper is back, we only have a small window before they go back underground. If I can catch them, I want to try."

Hannibal nodded.

"What do you require of me?" He asked.

Will couldn't help the warmth growing in his chest. Hannibal was perfect. Will wanted to curl up inside his chest and live there. He thought he would finally feel safe, enclosed by Hannibal's ribs.

"Anything you notice, at all," he said, "I'll need the pictures, but Jack should take care of that. I will want your observations from a medical perspective, and details of everything. I know you can do details really well. I've seen your drawings. That's part of the reason I want you to be the one to do this. I'll need you to be able to describe it well enough I can imagine standing there myself. I think you can do it, but tell me if this is all too much. Tell me if I'm expecting too much from you."

Hannibal smiled and shook his head, his hand squeezing Will's arm gently. Will hadn't even realized it was still there. Hannibal had been touching him this whole time, and he hadn't even been aware of it.

"Not in the slightest, Will," Hannibal said, "I will do whatever I can to help. I think this sounds like an opportunity for me to learn from you, and we can learn if this is a way we can work together. I think it may also be to our advantage with Agent Crawford, if this works well. He would be eager to allow me more access to the investigation, and I can be of more help to you here."

Will flushed a bit, noticing how each point Hannibal brought up was centered on Will, and their interactions together. He hadn't made it about catching a killer, though most people would. He hadn't even made it about his own curiosity to see into the workings of the FBI and the doings of the killer. People were liable to do that too. But not Hannibal.

"I'd like that," Will said with a soft nod, hoping he wasn't being too obvious about his swirling emotions, "I hope it all works out."

Hannibal offered his own nod along with another brief increase of pressure on Will's arm, and then he was gone, off to discuss it with Jack. Will was left feeling a bit empty, or exposed. Hannibal was a presence that both filled him up and covered him with safety and protection. Without him, Will felt something like an autumn leaf, drifting across an abandoned parking lot on a cold breeze. Unmoored and dull.

Will took the files to his office, the room off his lecture hall. He would be able to lock it up when he wasn't there, so he didn't have to worry too much about somebody coming snooping, and it was away from the labs and offices of everyone else so he could really be alone with his thoughts.

Alone with the Ripper, that is.

Will began to go through the files, reading what was there and studying each picture with an avid interest he hadn't expected to feel.

There was something new about this case. New to him, at least. The Ripper wasn't like any of the killers he had studied before, gotten to know. The Ripper had a clear set of preferences, tastes. They didn't seem to have a pattern of selecting victims, as far as anyone had been able

to tell so far, but there was most assuredly a pattern to what they did with the bodies once they were dead.

Each scene was set up like an art gallery. They were beautiful, even considering the death they were made of.

One of them caught Will's eye, not because it was particularly relevant or flashy, but because it seemed significant. A man had been left sitting in a church pew, his tongue removed. But the tongue hadn't been taken, as a few of the man's organs had been. Instead, it was placed in the bible the man was holding on his lap, marking a passage.

Something about that was telling. It told Will something about the Ripper.

He looked at a few others, and thought he was right about it.

Though they might not have any direct connection to the killer, these were all personal.

No, they weren't personal the way other killings were. They weren't angry. Insulted, maybe. But not angry. The part that was personal wasn't about what the victim had done to the killer, but rather a kind of commentary about who they were as people, before they had died.

Give him something to do with his tongue other than wagging it.

Will wondered about the victims, but he wondered more about the killer. The Chesapeake Ripper. He wondered why this man had offended them so, to the point where they had wanted to illustrate to the entire world just what kind of man he had been, and humiliate him in his death.

Will read page after page, studied picture after picture, filling his head with names and places.

Jeremy Olmstead. Andrew Caldwell. Michelle Vocalson. Darrell Ledgerwood. Christopher Word. Minneapolis. Essex. Baltimore.

Most of them were in Baltimore. That was where the Ripper had set up camp, or settled down. Whatever you would call it.

By the time Hannibal returned, prepared to tell Will every detail of what he had observed, Will's head was swimming with it all, and he wasn't entirely sure who he was anymore.

"Will?"

Will blinked up at Hannibal, confused and muddled.

"Sounders of three," Will said distantly, not entirely aware he was even speaking. They sounded like someone else's words. "Always sounders of three. He's patient, so why are they so close together? He could kill one and wait, then another. But it's always three, rapid fire. And he disappears. Why?"

Hannibal knelt in front of Will, taking his hands in his own and looking up at Will's face intently.

"Where are you right now, Will?" Hannibal asked.

Will tipped his head, looking over the top of Hannibal's head at the room around him. But he wasn't seeing his office. He was seeing a workshop, and a man laying on the sturdy worktable. He was impaled with nearly every tool from the shop. A shadowy figure was standing over him, holding the final implement of the design.

"Watching the master at work," Will said, nearly breathless, "but I can't really see him. I'm curious, but I won't interrupt him. This is the final touch. Completing the picture."

The shadow inserted the final tool, and the scene dissolved around them, leaving Will blinking and jarred by the reality he found himself in.

Hannibal was kneeling in front of him, holding his hands.

"Sorry," Will said quickly, feeling his chest tighten with anxiety, "I didn't see you come in. I hope I didn't say anything too weird."

Hannibal smiled and shook his head.

"You were absorbed in a recreation, I think," he said, "would you tell me what you saw?"

Will swallowed, wishing Hannibal would stand up. It was strange and wrong for him to be kneeling there, looking up at Will like this.

"Jeremy Olmstead," Will said, then realized that name probably didn't mean anything to Hannibal, "The eighth Ripper victim. The one Jack told me to get familiar with in order to know why Chilton is so dead set on Gideon being the Ripper."

Will pulled his hands from Hannibal's grip and turned towards the desk, picking up the picture he needed and feeling immense relief when Hannibal stood to look at the pictures.

"These look familiar to you?" Will asked, knowing what Hannibal would say.

"The scene I have just returned from was very similar to this," he said, confirming Will's guess, "the pattern is nearly identical, though the implements were different, as was the subject."

Will nodded, staring at Jeremy's body in the picture, looking for anything he could use to figure out who had killed him. Hannibal produced a folder of pictures and set them on the desk, and Will eagerly reached for them. He found he was excited to see them, and he tried to convince himself it was just so he could solve the case and catch the killer.

Chapter End Notes

Updates and responses to comments may be a little bit delayed for a while. I'll try to get to them whenever I can.

Up next: Hannibal and Will discuss the Ripper

29

Chapter Summary

Will and Hannibal talk about the Ripper, and Will has to turn down an invitation to Hannibal's for dinner.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Do you think this is the work of the Chesapeake Ripper?” Hannibal asked.

Will scoffed and raised an eyebrow at the man.

“What do *you* think?” he asked.

Hannibal’s lips twitched in an aborted smile, and Wil knew they already agreed about it. He was glad, because he knew he would need help to convince Jack.

“There are certainly similarities,” Hannibal said, “but it lacks the touch of creativity these other scenes show.”

Will nodded.

“It’s not *just* unimaginative,” he said, “It’s not artistic. It’s a cheap copy. But I don’t think Abel Gideon knows that. I think he actually believes he’s the Ripper.”

Hannibal studied Will for a moment, as if he wasn’t entirely sure Will was serious.

“You believe Fredrick Chilton has convinced him he is the Ripper.”

Will sighed and scraped the nail of his thumb under his lip. This could cause him a lot of problems if he made the claim. Chilton wouldn’t take the accusation lightly.

“I think it isn’t entirely beyond him,” Will admitted, “He wants so badly to have notoriety, to be a name people recognize. It’s possible he did it unintentionally, but I think it’s more likely he meant to do it, regardless of whatever he has convinced himself of now.”

Will looked to Hannibal for a reaction, but was met with nothing more than casual consideration.

“You think I’m crazy, don’t you?” he asked, feeling the beginning of panic welling in his chest. If Hannibal didn’t believe him, he would never be able to convince Jack. If Hannibal didn’t believe him, maybe he really was crazy.

“Of course not,” Hannibal said, “I am considering how we might confirm your theory. Doctor Chilton is not likely to admit to it, but we may find a way to learn the truth from Doctor Gideon himself.”

Will felt relief wash over him, and he let out a long breath. Hannibal was on his side. Just like always.

“It’s a shame you cannot do an interview yourself,” Hannibal continued, “You would be the most likely to catch inconsistencies or lies.”

Will nodded, almost able to repress the shudder he felt at the idea of going into that place.

“I would if I could,” he said, “but that place, especially the cells-”

Hannibal placed a hand on Will’s shoulder, stopping him.

“I understand completely, Will,” he said, “and I am not asking you to. I only hope I can serve as an acceptable proxy for you. I fear I will fail you.”

Will smiled and shook his head, amazed once more by the fact that Hannibal could touch him without sending him into a state of panic.

“Let’s hear what you thought about the scene,” he said, “and we can figure out what will work going forward.”

Hannibal matched Will’s smile and turned to the file, explaining each detail he had noticed that the pictures didn’t show well enough. Will listened and asked questions, and hours went by.

—

“Hell, I was right about this,” Will said, rearranging the photos on his desk. After everything Hannibal had been able to tell him, he was getting a clear picture of it in his head. “This is great. It’s almost as good as if I was actually there. Exactly what I need.”

Hannibal smiled.

“I am glad to help,” he said, “but the hour is growing late. May I invite you to dinner?”

Will looked up at the clock with wide eyes, seeing that Hannibal was right. It was really getting late. His heart leapt at the invitation, then sank in disappointment.

“I can’t,” he said, grimacing as he gathered photos and file folders, “My dogs are going to be upset with me for being this late. I dread to think what I might find if I leave them any longer.”

Hannibal nodded in understanding, helping Will to clean up his desk.

“I can bring dinner to you,” he offered, “unless you feel I am overstepping my bounds by inviting myself. That would be rude of me.”

Will grinned to himself. Hannibal wasn't rude. He was sometimes petty, and Will thought he could probably be ruthless if the circumstances called for it, but so far never truly rude.

"No, I mean, that sounds fine. But are you sure?" he asked, "it's an awful lot of effort, and you won't even be able to come inside. I don't think it's worth it."

Hannibal huffed softly, handing a stack of folders to Will and smiling.

"I am entirely sure, Will," he said, "I would not have offered if I did not consider you worth the effort."

Will felt his face heat at the way Hannibal said it, but nodded his consent anyway.

"Alright. See you again soon, then," he said.

Hannibal agreed, and they parted ways. Will kept thinking about the case on his way home, unable to get the images and details out of his head.

The first three known Ripper victims had all been killed within nineteen days. One in Minneapolis, one in Essex, and the last in Baltimore. That was the one that started the rest of the killer's career in the area. The Ripper had gone underground for eighteen months before taking three more from Baltimore. The next hiatus had only lasted eleven months, and the final victim hadn't been displayed. It had been Miriam Lass.

Will could tell Jack carried a lot of guilt for that one, and he secretly felt that was just. Jack had taken her out of her classes and thrust her into the field without proper preparation, and purposefully off the books so there was no trail to follow when she had disappeared. If she had been an actual agent, there would have been some kind of clue as to where she had gone.

She had vanished right after Jeremy Olmstead. The first wound man scene.

Will thought that meant there had to be some significant clue in the scene. Something Miriam Lass had seen, and it had made her a threat to the Ripper.

If only Jack had been watching her, keeping track of where she was going and what she had seen.

The Ripper was an artist. That was what Will really fixed on. Everyone so far had been focused on the clear signs that the Ripper was a doctor, probably a surgeon, but Will thought it was much more important to recognize that they were an artist. Will thought it was more important because the Ripper thought it was.

Will wondered what medium the Ripper would use when he wasn't working with flesh. Surely, during the hiatus', the Ripper had not stopped creating art altogether. So what kind of art would they be making in their everyday life?

Will didn't know yet.

The dogs were thrilled when Will opened the door, and he apologized to them all. He let them out and played with them for a while, giving them as much attention and exercise as he could

before he decided he should get ready for Hannibal to come over.

He lit the lamps in the back yard, cleaning off the table and making sure he wouldn't be ashamed to have Hannibal there again.

It was strange and new for Will to have anyone over to his house, even though Hannibal never came inside. He hadn't gotten close enough to anyone since buying the house to ever invite anyone. He just didn't have any close friends.

He had set up the back patio entirely for himself, just like the rest of the house. It wasn't designed for anyone else's enjoyment but his own, so in a way it was just as revealing and intimate as his house was. He was sure someone as intelligent as Hannibal would see things in the area that could tell him things about Will.

But Will didn't mind. With Hannibal, he was okay with it. He wanted to get closer, and have someone actually know him. It was as frightening an idea as it was pleasant.

Will wondered what kind of food Hannibal would bring. Whatever it was, he knew it would be delicious. Hannibal never disappointed when it came to food.

Not that he had really ever disappointed in any other context.

—

"I thought to make something more to your tastes tonight," Hannibal said, producing containers and dishes from his bag, "as you so often accommodate my preferences."

Will huffed, grinning as he brought out a pitcher of sweet tea.

"You didn't have to do that," he said, "I always like whatever it is you-"

He stopped short, inhaling deeply. He wouldn't have imagined it, but Hannibal had actually made something Will was very familiar with. And, of course, it smelled amazing.

"Is that what I think it is?" he asked, hurrying over to the table where Hannibal was standing.

Hannibal smiled broadly, clearly pleased by Will's reaction.

"A cajun gumbo," he confirmed, "I was given the recipe after doing a favor for an old colleague. I was told it was a highly sought after family secret."

Will laughed. He was happy. Perfectly happy, in that moment.

"Sounds about right," he said, "that's how most of them are, at least in my experience. If it tastes anything like it smells, you found one of the really good ones."

Will was peering into the dishes at the food, hardly even realizing he had stepped right up so his shoulder was nearly brushing Hannibal's. Before meeting Hannibal, he never would have been able to stand that near someone, much less without noticing. He was always far too aware of everyone and where they were in relation to himself.

Will only noticed how close they were when Hannibal placed a hand on his arm to get his attention. Will looked up, and saw Hannibal's face was absolutely filled with joy. He looked as happy as Will felt, and it was entirely directed at Will. He was happy because he had made Will happy.

"I had worried you would find it wanting," Hannibal confessed, "or even presumptuous of me. I'm pleased to see you are pleased."

Will laughed again, this time softer.

"Let's eat, and then I can tell you if my recipe is better," he said.

It only struck him later that he would almost never have said something like that before. It was familiar and teasing, and entirely unlike him. He always allowed his mind to get in the way, overthinking anything before he had the chance to mess up.

But Hannibal's smile only widened in response, and he pulled out a chair for Will as if he was the host of tonight's dinner. In a way, Will supposed he was. He had made the food, after all, and was thinking of Will's wants and needs before his own. As a good host would.

Will didn't understand him. But he wanted to.

Will took his first bite of the gumbo and was instantly filled with memories from his childhood. Unlike how he usually experienced memories from that time, these were all good ones, and filled him with warmth.

Chapter End Notes

So they still get to have dinner together. Gosh, they seem to eat together more often than they eat apart XD I'll have to watch myself.
Side note- I was surprised how much research I had to do just to get the case details for this chapter. It shouldn't have been that hard to find information on Hannibal's victims. I'll probably have to make up some stuff to fill in the blanks for future chapters. I was trying to stick to canon, but they have failed me. >:(

Up next: A flashback, and a conversation that scares Will more than the Ripper did.

30

Chapter Summary

Introducing Will's first dog! Say hello to Moose!
Also, Will is afraid that the universe hates him specifically, but that's only a minor issue at this point.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Will, honey, would you like to stay for dinner?"

Will smiled nervously, staring at one of Caroline's large pearl earrings. She had never asked before, but Will usually wasn't around when it was time for dinner. He could already smell her gumbo, and it made his mouth water. He knew his dad wouldn't have anything fancy on the stove this evening. Most likely hamburger helper or a fish he'd caught that day if they were lucky. If Will was unlucky, Monty Graham would have already started drinking.

Will liked fish fine, but it felt like the only really good, fresh food they ever had and he was getting tired of it. Not that he would ever tell his dad that.

"Can I call my daddy and ask if that's alright?" he asked, glancing towards Lirette, who nodded.

"Of course, son," Lirette said, "you go ahead and ask. We can send the leftovers home with you so he can have some as well. Wouldn't want Monty feeling left out."

Will nodded and shuffled into the kitchen to use the phone. Caroline stepped out of his way, then bent down to scratch Moose between the ears.

Moose was a big dog, just like Lirette had said. Will's dad had gotten him from someone he'd met at work, and he'd been as pleased as punch when he'd shown him to Will. Lirette had been just as pleased, especially when he learned that Moose was only a year old.

Lirette was teaching Moose to lay on top of Will when he began to panic. It was actually helping a lot, especially when he woke up from nightmares in the middle of the night and couldn't breathe.

Moose drooled a lot, though. Will was already getting used to finding tacky or dried patches of drool on his shoes and clothes and bedding. Monty didn't say anything about it other than saying it was to be expected of a dog that young, but Will could tell he was starting to wonder if he had made a mistake.

One other thing that Moose helped with was Monty Graham's fear of Will being taken again. He was a huge dog, and scary looking. Whenever Will left the house, Monty was alright if he had Moose with him. They both slept better knowing Moose was in the same room as Will, too. Only a fool would mess with a dog that large, and Moose had grown attached to Will real quick. Will knew Moose would defend him if the need ever came.

"Monty Graham."

"Hey, daddy," Will said, smiling a bit. His dad sounded so serious when he answered the phone. "I was wondering if I could stay for dinner with Lirette and Caroline."

There was a pause, and Will knew his dad was probably worried. But he thought chances were good he would give Will permission anyway. Especially because he had Moose.

"Will you be home before it's dark?" Monty asked.

Will twirled the phone cord around his fingers, calculating.

"I'll try to," he said, "If it gets dark before I leave, I'll ask Lirette to drive me home. Is that alright?"

Monty sighed softly.

"Alright. You be safe, and you keep that dog with you. Call me if anything happens."

Will promised he would be careful, and they said goodbye. Caroline was in the door of the kitchen when he turned around, smiling.

"We'll be glad to have you, sweetheart. Do you like sweet tea?"

Will nodded, his eyes down at her practical canvas shoes.

"Yes Ma'am," he said, not sure exactly what he was supposed to do. He hadn't eaten at anyone else's house without his dad, and not for years.

Caroline stirred her pot on the stove, freeing Will from the expectation of eye contact.

"There's a pitcher in the fridge right there. Would you put it on the table?"

Will nodded again, even though she couldn't see it. He turned toward the fridge as Lirette's voice carried in from the front.

"Putting him to work, Care? Don't be too hard on the boy," he called.

Caroline rolled her eyes, smiling at Will as if they were sharing a joke.

"Will doesn't mind lending a hand," she called back, then her voice lowered again to address Will, "if you *do* mind, you just let me know and I'll lay off."

Will turned toward the table with the pitcher, his entire body thrumming with nerves.

“I’m glad to have something to do,” he told her.

It was mostly the truth, because he really didn’t mind helping, even though he felt uncomfortable. He felt like there might be rules he didn’t know about, or expectations he wouldn’t be able to meet. He didn’t know about how they were when he wasn’t there, and he couldn’t help but feel they weren’t really comfortable with him being there either.

Caroline only nodded and returned to the food on the stove, not asking him to do anything else. Lirette came in and set the table, and they all sat down to eat.

“You need to eat more, Will, darling,” Caroline prodded about halfway through the meal, “you’re thin as a rake and I worry the wind is gonna pick you up some day like a kite.”

Lirette gave her a chiding look, probably worried her concern would feel overbearing to Will. Even though Lirette was the closest thing Will had to a friend, he still handled him with kid gloves most of the time.

“Don’t pester the boy, Care,” Lirette said, but Will was smiling. He had imagined himself trailing behind Moose, held aloft by a stiff breeze, holding his arms out like a scarecrow.

“I don’t mind it,” Will said softly, too nervous to speak up, “she’s right. I just haven’t had much appetite as of late.”

That seemed to remind Caroline who exactly Will was, and what he had been through. Her expression turned sheepish, and she glanced at Lirette with an air of chastisement.

Will wished they wouldn’t act that way. He didn’t like people to treat him like he was glass. He knew it was hard, since he was easy to upset now. He knew he made people nervous, always afraid he would go into a panic attack. He didn’t blame them for not knowing how to act. He was lucky the Lirette’s were as comfortable around him as they were.

But it was hard to not have anyone who could just be normal with him.

“This is delicious,” Will said, hoping to break the tension. And it was the truth. He couldn’t remember the last time he had eaten something that good.

His sincerity must have come through in his tone, because Caroline’s smile reappeared. Her smile was beautiful and wide. The kind of smile that made someone feel welcome and loved.

“I’ll give you the recipe,” she said, and Lirette raised an eyebrow at her in surprise, “You or your dad can make it at home sometime.”

Will shrugged.

“You don’t have to,” he said, “Daddy and I don’t cook much.”

He left out the fact that they didn’t cook much because cans and boxes of food were cheaper than anything fresh, and could be saved for the times when wallets were thin.

“You’d be smart to take her up on it,” Lirette told Will soberly, “I’ve never once heard her offer to give someone her secret recipe. Even if you can’t use it now, someday you’ll want it.”

Caroline bumped her husband gently with her elbow, smiling.

“Girls love a man who can cook,” she said, “you can get as many dates as you want in college if you have just one good recipe in your hat.”

Will smiled nervously, but didn’t argue again. It really was delicious, and he thought he might try making it someday.

—

“Your verdict?” Hannibal asked, studying Will’s thoughtful expression as he chewed.

“It probably matches mine, quality wise,” Will said, “but I don’t think anyone could compare to Caroline’s.”

Hannibal tipped his head curiously, his eyes still glittering with pleasure.

“Family or friend?” he asked.

Will smiled sadly.

“A bit of both,” he said, “Only mother I ever knew, but we weren’t really related. She was the wife of the officer who came and got me after the basement.”

Hannibal was silent, eating his own portion as he allowed Will to either continue or not.

“I never told my dad all of it,” Will said, “And no one really knew all of it but me, but Lirette knew more than anyone else, and he honored my wish not to tell my daddy. He helped me get back on my feet, almost literally, seeing as I had a broken ankle after my escape, but he’s the closest thing to a friend I’ve had all these years. Before she died, Caroline did her best to be the same.”

Hannibal was listening, probably the same way Will had listened as Hannibal had told the story of his sister and why he could never go back to his homeland. Will felt the warm affection in his chest grow in size and strength, feeling almost as if he would burn from the inside out with the intensity of it. He had never wanted anything as much as he wanted Hannibal, and at the same time he was still so afraid of ending up being someone who would hurt him.

Because the truth of the matter was that Will just wasn’t safe for anyone. He knew it, even though Hannibal had been working so hard to convince him otherwise. He just couldn’t get close to someone without them getting hurt in one way or another.

He didn’t want to do that to Hannibal, but he couldn’t quite bear to let him go, either.

“Caroline gave me her recipe, but I’ve never been able to make it taste the same,” Will said, “I’m half convinced she left something out just so that would happen.”

Hannibal smiled.

“Is Lirette still alive?” Hannibal asked, catching the tenses Will used for them both.

Will nodded.

“Alive and kicking,” he agreed, “He’s in a home down in New Orleans. I call him sometimes, and we talk. I expect him to outlive us all.”

Hannibal nodded.

“Men like that always seem to,” he agreed, “I’m curious you have never mentioned him before.”

Will smiled sadly.

“I guess I’ve been afraid to,” he said, feeling silly about it now, “he’s so old, and he sounds sick. I can’t shake the feeling that he has been staying alive all these years because I needed him to. Telling you about him feels like admitting I’m getting better, and I might not need him for forever.”

Hannibal nodded again, smiling in amused understanding.

“How do you feel, now that you have told me?” he asked.

Will huffed.

“Scared as Hell,” he confessed, “But I figured I won’t ever stop being scared of that until I did tell you. Now, we’ll just have to see if he dies or not.”

Hannibal set his hand on Will’s arm, the way he had been doing more frequently. It was a familiar, intimate gesture, and Will’s chest ached at it.

“You are a far braver man than I,” Hannibal said softly, “to put it in the hands of the universe.”

Will frowned, furrowing his brow at Hannibal.

What would Hannibal possibly have that he wouldn’t trust to the universe? Or, since Will knew he believed in some fashion or another, the hands of God. He seemed so comfortable and carefree all of the time, and Will couldn’t imagine.

Will couldn’t come up with any response, and eventually Hannibal released his arm after a brief increase in pressure.

“I apologize if that made you uncomfortable,” Hannibal said, “I only wanted to express how much I admire you. I worry you are unaware how strong you really are.”

Will huffed a wry laugh and shook his head.

“Yeah, I’m a real goliath,” he joked, “what gave it away, my shaking like a leaf when people stand too close, or my gasping for breath when a room is just a bit too dark?”

Hannibal met Will’s eyes and Will was immediately sobered by his expression. He wasn’t upset with Will for trying to deflect with humor, but he wouldn’t allow Will to avoid the topic entirely. Will felt his face heat, partly in shame and partly just for being under such direct scrutiny from Hannibal.

“Self-deprecation will only hinder your recovery, Will,” Hannibal said seriously, “You can only improve so much if you allow yourself to say such things.”

Will sighed and rubbed at his face. He knew that, but it always felt easier to make fun of himself than to admit he was just broken to the point he might not be able to be fixed.

“Old habit,” he said, grimacing at himself and knowing that would probably make Hannibal worry about him more.

Hannibal nodded, but predictably didn’t seem pleased.

“Then it will die hard, but you must kill it,” he said seriously.

Will couldn’t help but laugh. Hannibal somehow managed to appeal exactly to Will’s sense of humor, and when he told a joke he managed to keep them on topic. Will wished he was that good.

Part of what made it so funny to him was that it brought to mind the fact that he was no stranger to killing.

“I guess so,” Will said, still smiling, “and we both know I’m capable of it.”

Hannibal smiled.

“Indeed. Quite adept at it, if I might add. Additionally, you are quick to learn, and stubborn. If you decide to stop this, I expect you will do it quickly and efficiently. The only hurdle is convincing you to do it.”

Will’s face heated, feeling like Hannibal had been paying a lot more attention to him than he had realized. He also realized that all it would take was Hannibal asking him, and he would do it. He would work to break the habit, just because Hannibal wanted him to.

Psychiatrists must use this trick a lot, making their patients yearn for their approval so desperately they will heal themself just to get it.

Was that what Hannibal was doing? Had he been doing all of this just to foster that desire in Will so he could use it like this?

Will didn’t think so. He thought he would have caught on before now if Hannibal was lying, and he didn’t think Hannibal would say the things he did just to get here. He wouldn’t go this

far.

“Well, if it’s what you want,” Will said, half joking.

Hannibal’s smile brightened, just a bit.

“It is,” he said, “I do. Nothing would please me more than to hear you speak well of yourself.”

Will swallowed, overwhelmed by the words. He really didn’t think Hannibal would just say that kind of thing without meaning it. He wasn’t above lying, clearly, but he didn’t waste praise or compliments.

“Alright,” Will said, “Okay. I’ll work on it.”

Hannibal nodded, clearly pleased.

Chapter End Notes

Will's afraid the mere act of telling someone about Lirette is going to make him die. Because he's not allowed to have nice things. Poor baby.

Up next: Will has a plan to bring the real Ripper out of hiding. Hannibal (not so)accidentally sends Will into a panic attack.

31

Chapter Summary

Will gives Jack a proposition. Hannibal gets a confession from Will, but probably not the one you want.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"I'm telling you, Jack," Will sighed, exasperated, "he's not the Ripper."

Jack folded his arms across his chest. Will knew his period of grace had ended. Jack was going to be tough on him again until either Will or Hannibal did something, or something serious happened on its own.

"Then explain it, Will," Jack said, "make me understand what it is you see that I don't."

Will felt like this was a waste of time, but he knew Jack wouldn't let up on him unless he gave him what he wanted.

"If the Ripper was going to recreate one of his tableaus, he would choose one that's more impressive. Something original, probably. When he did the first wound man, it was a sort of exploration. He got what he wanted from it, and that was the end. And, if he was in prison, attacking a nurse wouldn't turn out like this. He would either do it to escape, or to cause damage and outrage. The pageantry is for his own entertainment, as a free man."

Jack pinched the bridge of his nose. He was having a hard time understanding, even though Will had explained it as clearly as he knew how. It just made sense to him, because he could see the Ripper so clearly in his head. He couldn't make Jack see the Ripper the way he did. All his life, he had tried to make other people be able to see what he could see, but it had never worked.

The closest he had come was Hannibal. Hannibal could understand most of what Will said, and didn't put all the responsibility onto Will to make him understand the rest. He met Will halfway, which was more than anything anyone else had been able to do before.

Maybe, if Will could explain it to Hannibal, Hannibal would be able to explain it in a way that Jack would understand. That seemed much more up his alley. Hannibal was just better with people.

"Okay. I accept that. I don't get it," Jack said. How big of him. "But if the Ripper isn't already behind bars, why is he waiting so long to show himself again?"

Will shrugged, but he had an idea.

He thought Miriam Lass had gotten close. Maybe spooked the Ripper into going underground. Will felt sure the Ripper hadn't fled, but he hadn't displayed Miriam as he usually did. He felt that spoke of respect. The Ripper had no reason to mock her, because she had found him. If Jack had kept better track of her, he might have caught the Ripper three years ago, whether or not he could have saved Lass.

"Maybe he's waiting for us to give him a reason to play again," Will said, then had a burst of inspiration, "you should announce that we think Gideon is the Ripper."

Jack frowned.

"Lounds already has the case all over," he said, "people already assume that's what we think."

Will shook his head.

"Most people," he agreed, "but the Ripper will know better. He won't fall for her made up stories. The only way it will work is if you actually announce that the Ripper is behind bars. Have a press conference."

Jack considered it, looking less upset as the idea took hold.

"How do you think the Ripper will react?" he asked.

"He'll come out of hiding. I know it for sure. This is plagiarism, and he won't stand for it. I don't think he'll make a mistake, necessarily, but it will open a window for us to catch him. As long as he's still in the area."

Jack nodded.

"It will give us more information to work with," he concluded.

Will nodded.

"At the very least," he said, "and if that's all we get, I say it's worth it."

Jack furrowed his brow.

"People are going to die," he said, "more people."

Will sighed. He had an idea the Ripper didn't really stop killing between his sounders, but just didn't display them and probably killed less frequently. In that way, forcing him into the open wouldn't really increase the body count. He didn't think Jack would respond well if he told him that, though.

"Yes."

That was all he could say. He wouldn't argue his point, but he wouldn't tell Jack to forget it either. Both of those would end up working against him. So he only agreed.

Jack nodded. Will knew he would do it, and that was it. It was out of Will's hands.

—

"You believe this is wise?" Hannibal asked.

Will shrugged.

"I don't really see any alternative," he said, "It's up to Jack, but I think he'll do it. If we don't do it, the Ripper stays hidden until a time of his own choosing. This way, we have some choice. If Jack is very, very lucky, the Ripper will make a mistake."

Hannibal tipped his head, watching Will curiously. For the first time in a while, Will found himself pacing. He had a lot of anxious energy, but not the same kind as he was used to. Part of it was the case, a new caliber of killer in his head, but part of it was the dreams. They had changed almost entirely from the nightmares he had grown used to, but were now a kind of dream he had never expected. Nearly every night, Will fell asleep, and into the waiting arms of the dream Hannibal who claimed he wanted Will the same way Will wanted the real Hannibal.

The dreams left him feeling empty and aching, and guilty. He had a harder time meeting Hannibal's eyes, thought he hadn't yet been asked to offer an explanation. Will didn't know what he was going to do about it, because he was petrified of ruining the good relationship he had with Hannibal.

"What would you expect to happen if the luck is not on Jack's side, but yours instead?" Hannibal asked, "you said "if Jack is very lucky". I am curious what you would have happen."

Will felt his face heat. He hadn't noticed his own verbal slip, but of course Hannibal had. Hannibal paid attention to everything.

Will ran a hand over his face, feeling tired despite the fact he had been sleeping through the night recently. The dreams hadn't been leaving him feeling well rested.

"We'd catch him before he kills anyone else," Will said, fighting a grimace at the way the lie tasted in his mouth. He just knew the truth wasn't acceptable. It wasn't something he could say to someone. Especially someone he wanted so desperately to start some new kind of relationship with.

Hannibal frowned. He set the utensils down on the counter, leaning his weight forward on his hands as he studied Will.

"Do you think lying to me at this juncture is productive?" Hannibal asked.

Will felt as if he had been slapped. He fought to keep his jaw from dropping, staring at Hannibal in open shock.

Hannibal didn't visibly react, just holding his slightly displeased expression and waiting for Will to answer the question.

"What?" Will asked.

Hannibal huffed softly, taking up his task once more.

"You have not told me a lie before now," he said, "I am always pleased and impressed by your honesty. You are brave for it. So it bewilders me that the answer to this question would frighten you enough that you feel you must keep it from me. I cannot honestly say I am not hurt by it, as well."

Will felt guilt crash down on him once more, and he thought he didn't have the strength to hold it.

He hadn't ever lied to Hannibal before now. He had been entirely honest from the beginning, if not entirely open. The truth was slow to emerge, but Will had never said anything blatantly untrue to Hannibal before now. If Hannibal hadn't caught it, would Will feel this guilty? Would he feel more guilty? He didn't know. He didn't know, but he felt even more guilty for not knowing. He felt guilty that he had thought Hannibal wouldn't catch the lie.

Will felt his chest tighten, and for the first time in a while, he felt like he couldn't breathe. The image of Hannibal, his face torn and bloody, his eyes missing, rose unbidden in Will's mind. He staggered to the table and fell into his usual seat, dropping his head and floundering for breath. He felt his heart beating against his ribs, and he felt like he was dying.

He had hurt Hannibal, without even touching him. Will really *wasn't* safe for him.

Hannibal was there, taking Will's face in his hands and tilting his head up.

"Will," Hannibal said, "you're alright. Remember what you must do. Think of Cassie Boyle. Imagine your lungs have been taken. You can breathe, because they are not there to be constricted."

Will lifted his hands and gripped Hannibal's wrists, remembering the dream he'd had where Hannibal had pulled his lungs from his chest. He imagined his ribs cracking apart, and a bird flying out and away. A little bird with an unsteady flutter. A broken wing.

Will pulled in a breath, his chest expanding painfully. He felt as if he had just experienced a drastic change in altitude, his ears aching and his muscles tense.

"Very good, Will," Hannibal said, sliding his hands back into Will's hair, "just keep breathing. I apologize. I hadn't thought it would cause you this much stress. I know how you value honesty."

Will felt tears running down his face, and he shook his head. He gasped in another breath, needing to tell Hannibal that it wasn't his fault. He felt crushed by the guilt of the lie, and for making Hannibal think it was wrong of him to have called it out.

"No," Will said, breathless but determined, "not your fault."

Hannibal wiped the tears from Will's cheeks with his thumbs, concern etched into his features.

Will pulled in another breath, less desperate for air now, but still struggling.

"I shouldn't have lied," he said, "You're right. I hate lies, and it's rude. I'm sorry."

Hannibal hesitated a moment, a debate in his eyes. Then, he pulled Will to his chest and wrapped his arms around him. Will instantly felt his body react, the feeling similar to the weight of a dog on his chest after a nightmare. Deep pressure therapy. At the same time, the ache that had taken up residence in Will's chest when he realized he was in love with Hannibal cried out to be acknowledged.

The shelter of Hannibal's arms felt so safe and warm. Will took in another deep breath, and could smell Hannibal's cologne. It mingled with the scents of the food he had been making, and comfort washed over Will in a wave. It was a good smell.

"If you felt compelled to hide the truth, you need not tell me. I would never ask you to tell me something you do not want to."

Will snorted derisively, more at himself than Hannibal.

"You're a strange psychiatrist," he quipped, still sniffling some, "The uncomfortable things are what I'm supposed to talk about, right? Therapy won't work if I don't, and it won't work if I lie to you."

Hannibal hummed softly, carding his fingers through Will's hair in a gesture that was far more comforting than Will would have expected.

"I am not your therapist, Will," he said softly, "You are my friend. As your friend, I do not want to upset you. I would do anything to see you smile."

Will's chest ached, the feeling more intense than ever before. He wanted to tell Hannibal how he felt, tell him everything. Even if it scared Hannibal away. Not telling him now would feel like lying.

But Will couldn't risk it. He was too selfish, and he recognized he was now dependent. He needed Hannibal too much.

"I lied because no sane person would say what the truth is, and no sane person could hear and accept it," Will confessed, wanting to stay there, with his face pressed to Hannibal's chest, forever.

Hannibal's hand paused for just a moment, then he gently pulled Will away to look at him.

Will couldn't meet Hannibal's eyes, especially so close and with the man's body heat still lingering on his clothes.

"Do you believe I will react negatively to what you feel or think?" Hannibal asked.

He sounded sorry, as if he had given Will a reason to feel that way. Will knew his fear wasn't logical, but he also knew it didn't matter. Anxiety didn't care about logic.

"No," Will answered, "I don't think you would. After everything, I know you probably wouldn't. I just can't afford to lose this. You're the only support system I have."

Hannibal's lips twitched a bit, and Will thought he was pleased with that, proud to offer Will stability. At least Will was starting to make him feel better.

"I will not abandon you," Hannibal said, and Will closed his eyes.

It wasn't a promise anyone could really make. He knew that. Things happened, and no one could see the future. Even if Will didn't repulse Hannibal with what he was thinking about the case, he could be killed in a car accident tomorrow, or next week. He could develop cancer and be gone in a few months or a year. No one could promise to never leave.

But it was reassuring that Hannibal said it anyway.

"I want to see one," Will confessed, the words spilling out like blood from a wound, "His scenes. The Ripper creates art with death, and I want to see one in person. I never saw the others except in pictures, because I wasn't on the case. I want to see one. If I'm lucky, there will be a really good scene, and I'll get to see it."

Will chewed on his lip, afraid to open his eyes and see the judgment or disgust in Hannibal's face.

"That's why I was afraid to tell you," Will said, softer, "I didn't want to admit I want people to die."

Hannibal let out a soft huff and pulled Will toward him. For one, wild moment, Will thought he was going to kiss him. Instead, Will felt Hannibal's forehead press gently to his own. They were so close Will could feel Hannibal's breath on his face, and smell the wine he had been sipping as he cooked.

"Will, I would not condemn you for finding beauty in the grotesque. That is what makes your mind so unique. Additionally, we cannot always control our desires, but we cannot do anything about them if we refuse to acknowledge and accept them."

Will pulled back and opened his eyes, meeting Hannibal's gaze with desperate hope filling his chest like a breath. He was met with an open expression of sincerity, without a hint of disgust or mockery. Hannibal didn't find Will's wishes ugly at all, though he should have. Anyone else would have.

What had shaped Hannibal to be this way? What force had created a man so perfectly suited to Will's needs and desires? How was he even possible?

If Will believed in God, he might have laid the credit at the deity's feet. It could have driven him back to worship, almost. What a change that would be.

"Are you going to tell Jack?" Will asked, his voice tense and worried.

Hannibal hadn’t told Jack much of what he and Will discussed. Will knew that. Jack kept Hannibal around because he could see clear improvements in Will’s mental state, but he wasn’t at all pleased that he was being kept in the dark about what was really going on. But this was new and different. This was something that was wildly concerning for an FBI agent, and could lead to real problems for Will if Jack found out.

Hannibal smiled.

“Jack is paying me to consult on the Ripper case,” he said, “Legally, he has no claim on our conversations, and I see no reason I should offer it. You are not committing a crime by thinking or feeling, Will, and I wouldn’t betray your trust by treating this as such.”

Will felt another wave of relief wash over him, and he smiled.

“Thank you,” he said, and he had never meant any words as much as he meant these. At the same time, he felt like they weren’t enough. They were cheap and flimsy in comparison to the full depth of affection and gratitude he felt filling his lungs.

Hannibal returned the smile and ran his hand through Will’s hair once more before he pulled away and stood up.

Will realized he had been having a panic attack in the middle of Hannibal making dinner. There was another flicker of guilt for interrupting, but it didn’t trigger the kind of avalanche the other had.

Hannibal washed his hands and returned to his work as if he had never been away, relighting the stove and taking up the utensils he had put down in order to help Will.

Will felt another rush of gratitude, that Hannibal would go to him even when it was so inconvenient and could potentially ruin the food he took so much pride in. If Will had all the words of every language known to man, he doubted he would be able to articulate just how deeply affected he was by Hannibal’s actions. No one had done this much for him, perhaps apart from his dad, who had raised him.

Chapter End Notes

Hannibal always seems to walk away from any bad situation having benefited in some way. At least it's a pattern I've noticed.

This chapter was a bit longer than my usual, because I'm going to be camping and won't update on my usual schedule. That also means I probably won't be able to answer comments until I get back.

Up next: Hannibal pries more information out of Will, and Will nearly makes another confession.

32

Chapter Summary

Will gets really close to saying it all.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"How would you feel if this plan does not work?" Hannibal asked, "If the Ripper recognizes it as a trap and does not resurface?"

Will frowned, chewing his food slowly.

"It *will* work," he said, almost defensively, "the Ripper will see it as slander. He'll feel compelled to correct it, even if he's suspicious of it."

Hannibal nodded, as if he had no doubt Will was correct.

"I trust you on the matter entirely. For the sake of hypotheticals, let us say it may not work. How would you feel, in that case?"

Will sighed softly. He could have guessed Hannibal would counter with that after his answer. Because he wanted the real answer to the question he had asked. Deflection wouldn't work on him. At least not tonight, on this topic.

"The truth is that I would be disappointed," he said, staring down at his food and chewing his lip, "Just as much, if not more, than Jack would be. But for a different reason."

Hannibal nodded. That answer seemed to satisfy him, but Will had the feeling they weren't done talking about it.

"Because you want to see one of the scenes for yourself," Hannibal concluded.

Will nodded, still chewing his lip. He wasn't afraid of how Hannibal would react to his answers anymore, but it still made him nervous to be putting all of it out in the open. He couldn't ignore it anymore once he said it out loud, and once Hannibal knew it. Saying it made it real.

"Because I want to see the Ripper," he said softly, "I want to feel what he feels."

Hannibal tipped his head, curious. Will hadn't mentioned this before, so Hannibal had every right to wonder.

“What is it you imagine the Ripper feels, Will?”

Will smiled bitterly.

“He’s not afraid,” he said, “the Ripper is confident in himself and he feels he has perfect control. He doesn’t worry he might hurt someone, because he always knows exactly what he’s going to do. He hurts people when he wants to, and doesn’t if he doesn’t. He never fears he will hurt someone on accident. He knows himself so well he doesn’t have to worry.”

Will considered for another moment, unsure if he wanted to continue. Hannibal didn’t interrupt, possibly sensing Will wanted him to so he wouldn’t have to say what he was thinking. He seemed to know those things. It was probably a psychiatrist trick.

“He feels powerful,” Will added, hating himself a little bit, “he has power over life and death, and he knows it. If I can stand there, in front of such a clear and blatant show of his power, and feel that power as if it’s my own. If I can do that-”

Will swallowed hard, his throat clicking uncomfortably.

“Maybe I’ll get better.”

Will felt his face flush with humiliation at the admission. It was ridiculous, to think he could be cured of his fear and guilt by something so simple and macabre. He was an idiot for thinking so, and he knew it. He knew Hannibal knew it, too. For people like him, there was no cure. There was no instant fix for the problems that coursed like poison in his mind.

But he couldn’t help feeling like maybe there was, and he was just the first person to realize it. Maybe it was different for everyone, and all you had to do was find the cure tailored to yourself. Maybe this was his.

He had always been cursed to see too much. Maybe that was why he could see this.

Hannibal showed no sign of judgment, nodding simply. It was as if they were discussing something with no more moral or ethical bearing than weekend plans. His ability to take things in his stride was enviable, and Will greatly appreciated it at times like this.

“Your mind reflects the attributes of whoever you turn it to,” Hannibal said, “It’s only natural to desire to reflect what you perceive as the best parts of someone you are being asked to study.”

That was a relief. Will hadn’t realized how much he needed to be told it was normal until Hannibal said it.

“I appreciate you saying that,” Will said, the words feeling strangely like a confession, “But I still feel like it’s not exactly the kind of thing I’d want Jack to know I want.”

Hannibal nodded again, smiling kindly.

“As I have said, I don’t intend to tell Jack anything you don’t wish me to,” he said, “But I am curious why you only open your mind to the killers. Boundaries and forts cannot be strong if

they are never reinforced. Allowing yourself to reflect the good you see could serve to do just that."

Will smiled sadly, almost amused that Hannibal didn't guess the reasons for it.

"I *have* to open up to them," he said, "It's my job. For anyone else, I would feel wrong for doing it without their permission. Even if I did, I've got enough voices in my head, always clamoring for my attention. It's exhausting to think of adding more."

Hannibal was silent, again as if he knew there was more. Something Will hadn't said yet.

After a time, Will sighed and gave in.

"I don't really have anyone who's safe for me to open to," he said, unable to meet Hannibal's eyes, "or, I haven't for a long time. Jack isn't exactly the most pleasant person to let into your head."

Hannibal smiled.

"Then the only reason you do not reflect me is that you feel it would be rude?" he asked.

Will shrugged.

"No one has ever wanted me to get in their head," he said, "when I accidentally reflect parts of people, they usually think it's mean or frightening. I don't want to isolate myself from you."

Will smiled bitterly.

"Can you imagine how Jack would react if you dropped me?"

Hannibal hummed thoughtfully.

"Perhaps someday I will have earned your trust enough you will no longer fear my rejection," he said, "for the time being, I give you an open invitation to reflect me if you ever feel it would be helpful."

Will nodded his head in thanks, wondering if he might find a chance to do so. Not around Hannibal, of course. Seeing someone act exactly like you was a spooky thing at best, and Will wouldn't want to do that to him. But maybe, when he had to deal with Jack, or someone else, it could work.

"Again, I appreciate it," he said, "And I don't think it's so much a matter of trusting you. I really just can't stand the thought of being entirely alone again. Talking to you, and just being around you, has been really good for me. I don't want to go back."

Hannibal reached out and took Will's hand. It reminded Will of that first time, in this same kitchen, after Hannibal had almost died.

Will's heart skipped in his chest, and he was amazed by everything that had changed between them now. Everything was different, and the world felt a little lighter. A little brighter. Not being alone managed to make everything seem bearable, even pleasant.

"I will not repeat my promise not to abandon you," Hannibal said, "As I doubt you believed me the first time. But I can say I can't imagine anything would ever make me wish to stop seeing you."

Will's face heated furiously, and his fingers tightened around Hannibal's reflexively. Hannibal had made it sound like more than a friendship, and Will's heart was beating aggressively in his chest at the thought, images from his dreams flooding his head against his will. He wanted so desperately, his chest aching with all the things he wanted. He wanted so many things, but also just one thing. He just wanted Hannibal. Hannibal, there with him, for him, in spite of him. Because of Him.

Will opened his mouth, not knowing what he was going to say. Not knowing what he wanted to say, or could possibly say.

His phone rang.

It was Jack.

Will stood up, pulling his hand from Hannibal's and shaking his head to clear it.

"Sorry," he said, stepping out into the front hall quickly. His voice sounded strange, and he realized he had tears in his eyes. He quickly wiped them away, cursing at himself. Hannibal probably thought he was some kind of fool, tearing up over their shared dinner.

"Jack, what's up?" Will asked.

His voice sounded closer to normal, at least.

"They want you to be there."

Will closed his eyes and let out a sharp sigh through his nose. He knew what Jack was talking about, and he should have been expecting it. He should have known.

"At the press conference," Will said, pinching the bridge of his nose, "when you say we think he's the Ripper. They want me there."

He was at least more equipped to deal with this than whatever had been happening in Hannibal's kitchen. He didn't like it, but he knew it was something he could deal with.

"Yeah," Jack said, "they want you to be there, because it's your idea. You won't have to talk, or answer questions. Just be there, as an expert, to support what I'll be saying. So people know it's not just me."

Will nodded to himself. It made sense, as much as it possibly could. They would want someone to blame, other than Jack, if things went south. He would be a presence of support, and a patsy. It made sense, as horrible as it was.

“Let me talk to Hannibal about it,” Will said without thinking.

“Of course,” Jack said, as if that was the natural thing to do, “just make sure he knows this is really important.”

Will put a hand over his face, frustrated with himself.

“Okay. I’ve already filled him in on the plan, so it shouldn’t be a problem.”

“Good,” Jack said, “get back to me soon.”

The line went dead, and Will dropped the hand holding his phone to his side. He leaned against the wall and tipped his head up to stare at the ceiling.

He hated things like this. It was part of the reason he had avoided working with Jack for so long. He didn’t want to be in the public eye at all, and had hated the fact that Freddie had written about him already. He didn’t want to be anywhere near journalists, even if they weren’t supposed to ask him anything and he didn’t have to talk to them.

And now he had to talk to Hannibal about it. As if Hannibal was his goddamn keeper.

Wasn’t that just about the truth?

Will began scraping his nail under his lip, hating this entire situation.

Will was hopelessly dependent on Hannibal at this point. He knew it, recognized it, and was helpless to stop it. Because he would be going back to the way things were before if he tried to break away from Hannibal. He was so much more functional now, and the bad days were so much less frequent. Hannibal was making him better, even if Will was depending on him.

So, Hannibal *was* essentially Will’s keeper, and Will hated it.

“Will?”

Will jumped slightly and turned to see Hannibal standing in the door to the kitchen, his head tipped and his eyes shining with concern.

“Sorry,” Will said again, wincing at himself for it, “Jack. I actually have something I need to discuss with you. But let’s get back to dinner. I feel like I should charge him for the time I spend talking to him when he’s interrupting my “therapy sessions”.”

Hannibal huffed a soft laugh, stepping back through the door and letting Will into the kitchen behind him.

“I doubt very much he would agree to it,” Hannibal said, watching as Will resumed his seat, “as the FBI is paying for the sessions, as convoluted as the paperwork may be.”

Will shrugged.

“Probably not,” he agreed, “but I’d like to see his face if I tried.”

Hannibal smiled.

Chapter End Notes

Saved by the bell, or thwarted by it? That entirely depends on perspective.

Up next: Another glimpse into Will's high school life. The aftermath of everything that had happened to him.

Wow. I leave for a week and half, and come back to an inbox with about 30 comments. Not all on this fic, but still. I felt so popular, logging back on and going through all those messages. It was nice to see them all.

Thank you for reading <3 I hope you're all enjoying it.

33

Chapter Summary

Flashback to Will's school days after he escaped.

Warning: homophobia and bullying

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will paced. He couldn't help it. He had tried sitting still for a bit, but he was too nervous and full of energy.

Hannibal was going to ask to be at the press conference with him.

Hannibal had listened to Will tell him what Jack was asking, what Will's concerns were, and all the nervous rambling Will hadn't been able to hold back. When Will had finally run down, Hannibal had offered to be at the press conference with him. To support him.

Will kept blushing and fidgeting just thinking about it. He was hopeless.

How could he possibly hope to act normal in front of so many people, cameras, and recorders, while standing next to Hannibal for everyone to see? With all those eyes on him, digging, claiming, judging. With Hannibal there, solid and perfect and stable. How could he hope to get through that unscathed?

But he would try. If he refused, Jack would deserve an explanation, and so would Hannibal. There was no logical reason for Will to say no, that he could tell them.

He was trapped in this agreement, then. He would have to be there, and stand tall. He would have to do his best to be that fabled poster boy Jack dreamed he would become.

"I would have you walk in the sun, without shame, your head held high. I think you look quite well when you are confident with yourself."

Will remembered Hannibal saying that to him. It felt so long ago, but still those words rang in his head, Hannibal's voice making his heart thud hard and slow in his chest. He was calm, but nervous. He hadn't ever dreamed he would feel both of those things at once, and that he might not mind.

It was distracting, but not bad.

—

“Will, could I talk to you for a minute?”

Will paused in his hurried cleaning up to head to the next class, looking up to the edge of Miss Grant’s desk. He felt his heart speed up a bit, his anxiety spiking at the thought he had done something wrong. He couldn’t think of anything he had done, but that didn’t stop him from being nervous.

Misinterpreting his hesitation, Miss Grant pulled out a notepad as the rest of the class filed out into the hall.

“I’ll write a note for your next class,” she said, “You won’t get in trouble for being late.”

Will swallowed, willing his pulse to slow, and put his textbook in his backpack before stepping over to the desk. His backpack was almost comically stuffed with textbooks and folders, because Will didn’t use a locker. They were in the hallways, making it difficult to avoid being brushed against if one needed to get into it between classes. Even if he had wanted one, they required a fee, and he wouldn’t ask his daddy for money. Especially not now.

Miss Grant produced a paper from a drawer, and Will instantly recognized it as his. Their most recent test. He didn’t see any red marks, or even a score at the top, so he thought she might not have gone over it yet. He quickly dismissed that idea. She wouldn’t have asked to talk to him about it if she didn’t know how he had done.

“You have a difficult time making eye contact,” Miss Grant said gently.

Will nodded. Silent.

“I understand you went through something very difficult,” she prodded further, wanting Will to open up, “something you may never fully recover from.”

Will didn’t respond. He had the looming suspicion he knew where this was going, and he dreaded it.

Miss Grant sighed, plucking a red pen from the jar on her desk. She uncapped it and wrote at the top of his test, giving him a perfect one hundred percent.

“You’re a really smart kid, Will,” she said, extending the test toward him,” You know all about trauma and the damage it can do to your mind. Have you considered talking to anyone about what you went through?”

Will took the test, careful not to touch her hand at all. He clutched it in his sweaty, shaking hands. He stared down at her desk, cheap, painted particle board. The best the school could afford.

“You mean a-” he forced himself not to use the word shrink, “a psychiatrist?”

Miss Grant folded her hands together on top of the cheap desk.

“Psychiatrists and therapists are expensive. I know that. Almost no working people can afford it these days,” she said, “but the school has three counselors, and I know one of them is very good. Would you consider talking to him?”

Will scraped the nail of his thumb under his lip, a habit he had begun after getting out of the basement. He couldn’t stop, even though he had tried. Sometimes he could see broken capillaries under the skin when he looked in the mirror.

“I don’t know,” Will said, knowing she wouldn’t accept a placating lie. She intended to follow up.

Miss Grant nodded smartly and pulled out a blue pen as she got her notepad ready again.

“I’ll write you two notes,” she said, “one for your class I’m making you late for, and one for Miles Henry. You’re organized, so I doubt you’ll lose it. If you want to talk, just give him the note.”

Will took both notes from her, grateful the conversation was over. He was honestly considering talking to Mr. Henry, mostly because she said he was good. He hadn’t trusted a school counselor to know how to deal with the kind of problems Will had. He knew most kids his age had nothing more than depression or anxiety. The worst of them suffered from abuse, in which case a counselor could pass them off to social services and people who knew how to deal with that kind of thing.

If Henry was really good, it might do Will some good to talk to someone other than Lirette.

“Thank you, Miss Grant,” he said, nodding politely and moving towards the door.

“One more thing, Will,” Miss Grant said, sending his heart fluttering against his ribs again. He stopped in his tracks and waited. “I don’t know how you’re doing in your other classes, but you really get psychology. I hope you’ll take my AP class next year.”

Will shrugged, seeing that was enough of an answer today, and left. He had to get to his next class.

He knew why she was asking. Apart from possibly wanting Will to nurture this skill, it would be good for the school. He knew they needed students who performed better in order to get more funding. They were in a poor part of town. Some advanced classes had actually been dropped due to not enough students qualifying for them or being able to pass. She wanted to keep AP psych, and knew he would do well in it.

Will slunk into the classroom, cursing Mr. Clark for setting it up so everyone faced the door. He saw everyone lift their heads and stare at him, and his skin erupted in goosebumps as he kept his own head down to stare at his sneakers.

“Yo, slut! What did the pervert like you to do to him?” a boy called from the back row, making Will freeze in place, flushing deeply.

Another boy piped up, sitting next to the first, “My momma said you got grabbed so a guy could use you as a sex slave. Did you like it?”

Tears sprang to Will’s eyes, and immediately both boys had pink slips on their desks. They had made the mistake of saying those things when Clark was standing nearby, and he didn’t hesitate to punish them.

“Both of you, go to the office. I’ll call down and let them know you’re coming. Will, please come over to my desk.”

Will shuffled over, blinking and trying not to cry. His chest felt tight, and he heard whispers. They were talking about him. About what might have happened to him. About how long he had been missing. About how he’d had a panic attack in the hall just the week before.

The two boys grumbled, but knew arguing wasn’t going to get them out of it, so they left. Mr. Clark picked up the phone at his desk and mumbled something into it, then sighed and turned to Will.

Will couldn’t see his face. He had his head down and his hair hung in front of his eyes. He couldn’t bear to look any higher than his own sneakers right then. He was humiliated and violated. He felt like he had just escaped the basement all over again. He felt like he needed to take a shower and scrub himself all over until his skin scraped off, leaving just his red and weeping muscles and tendons, wrapped securely around his bones.

“I’m sorry, Will,” Clark said, “that was unfeeling of them. Do you need a moment to collect yourself?”

Before everything, Will would have laughed at the way Mr. Clark talked. Like he was an English teacher rather than a Math teacher. Very proper and formal. The wrong words for a math teacher, in Will's mind.

Will shook his head.

“Are you certain?” he pressed, concern deep through the words, “you don’t have to-”

“Please,” Will said softly, not caring that he was interrupting. He just couldn’t stand the way people treated him. He couldn’t find anyone who could treat him like a real person. “Just forget it.”

Clark hesitated for another moment, and Will saw one of his hands twitch, as if he wanted to pat Will on the shoulder. If he did that, Will would either scream or stop breathing. He was too tightly wound right now, and just one more wrong thing would send him spiraling.

“Alright,” Clark said at last, “Have a seat.”

Will nodded and headed to a desk. He just wanted this day to be over. Last class of the day, and he wanted it to be done.

“He’s the one from the posters?”

“Yeah. He was gone for almost two years.”

“My dad said the only way anyone gets out of that is doing whatever the perv wants until they let you go.”

“That’s so gross! Do you think that made him gay?”

Mr. Clark clapped once, his hands coming together with a sound loud enough he might have slapped someone. His voice was stern and disappointed when he spoke, and Will knew he was well aware of what was being said among the students. Will stared at his desk, feeling his mind detach the way he had learned to do when the man had wanted to have his fun. His tears dried without being shed, and his thoughts floated away on a calm breeze.

He was standing in a stream, a fishing pole in hand. Nothing to be afraid of, and no one to be ashamed in front of.

Chapter End Notes

Don't know if that was bad enough to warrant the warning, but I wanted to cover my bases. He's in highschool, in the south. In the past. So this was pretty tame compared to what I could have written.

Up next: Will prepares for a press conference, with Hannibal's help

34

Chapter Summary

Will has a little bit of a breakdown before the conference. Hannibal is there for him.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will was nervous. Of course he was. He was about to be ogled by reporters. People who had heard of him, seen him in grainy pictures, but never been able to really see him. He was being put on display, to either be the face of success, or of failure.

One thing he could be grateful for was that Freddie Lounds wouldn't be there. She had been barred, mostly because Jack was upset with her. Will thought it possible Jack had also been thinking of Will when he had made the request to have here barred from the conference, but he wouldn't count on it.

Hannibal was there, serene as the eye of a hurricane while everyone else bustled about like chickens with their heads cut off. Will felt himself drawn towards Hannibal despite his reservations, if only to find respite from the storm.

Hannibal smiled and bent his head to speak to Will quietly among the chaos.

"Quite the festivity they are making of it, are they not?" he asked.

Will couldn't suppress a smile. Hannibal always managed to put him at ease.

"Guess so," he agreed, "but I can understand. This needs to be good. We're only going to get one shot at this."

Hannibal nodded.

Will realized, then, that Hannibal's hand had found its way to his arm once more. It seemed a largely unconscious gesture, an instinctive attempt to ground and comfort Will. Now he was allowed to touch, Hannibal was taking every opportunity to use it to help Will. And Will would be damned if it wasn't working.

A flutter in his chest, and Will was on the verge of doing something he wouldn't be able to take back.

"Will Graham. Fancy seeing you here."

Will's stomach dropped, and every muscle in his body tensed. That voice sent every voice in his head shouting in panic, begging him to run. To get as far away from the source of that greasy, fumbling voice as he possibly could.

Hannibal's fingers tightened fractionally on Will's arm, likely in reaction to his noticing Will's distress. His eyes were already fixed on the man behind Will, his dark eyes fathomless and merciless.

"Fredrick," Hannibal said without any warmth, "I was not aware you would be here today."

Will turned. He had to. But he ducked his head and kept his eyes down so he was staring at Chilton's shoes. He noted there was a slight crease in the hem of his slacks, and a scuff on the side of one of his shoes. He wanted so desperately to be refined and elegant, the way Hannibal was without even trying. Chilton just couldn't ever quite get it right.

"Of course I'm here," Chilton drawled, that self-important tone that always set Will's teeth on edge, "I'm the one who found the Chesapeake Ripper, after all. Without me, you would all be running around after shadows. I'm surprised *you're* here, Doctor Lecter. I thought, after your little display at the hospital, Agent Crawford would have barred you from the investigation."

Will risked a curious glance up at Hannibal. He hadn't heard of any "display" at the hospital. Hannibal's expression was inscrutable. He didn't seem to be at all perturbed by Chilton's words.

"However inadvisable my choice of words at the time, Jack understands that I had a job to do, and did not appreciate being waylaid."

Will frowned, chewing softly at his lower lip. He would have to ask Hannibal about it later, because it sounded like something important. He wondered why Hannibal hadn't told him about it already.

Chilton seemed unruffled, most likely because he believed he was being given exactly what he had always wanted.

Notoriety.

"Inadvisable indeed," he said, then apparently turned back to what he had meant to do when he first walked over, "Will, I never thought I'd see the day you'd make a public spectacle of yourself."

Will's face heated in shame and he wished he was anywhere but here. He wanted to die rather than have to deal with this.

"I didn't want to be here," Will said quietly, digging the nails of his hands into his palms so they hurt.

Chilton laughed. The sound of it made Will press harder, wishing he could make himself bleed that way. He hated this.

“Of course not,” Chilton said, “after what Freddie Lounds has been saying about you, I wouldn’t expect you to want to show your face anywhere.”

As he spoke, Chilton reached out, as if to lay a hand on Will’s arm. Will jumped backwards without even thinking about it, crashing directly into Hannibal’s chest. Hannibal caught him, steadying his trembling frame without giving it a second thought. He was deceptively strong, righting Will with ease.

“Fredrick, do not touch Will. If you continue to insult him, I will insist you not speak to him either.”

Will pressed his lips together. Hannibal was defending him, but it felt like he was just a child being fought over. He hated it.

Will pulled away from Hannibal, trying not to seem angry. It wasn’t really Hannibal’s fault. He didn’t realize. Will knew that.

“I didn’t realize you were Will’s *caretaker* , now,” Chilton said, shifting his weight in a way that was supposed to be satisfied, but just made him seem unbalanced, “I’m sure we could find so many things to discuss.”

“I am *my own* caretaker, thank you,” Will snapped, lifting his eyes to the collar of Chilton’s shirt, “and you would know this if you were any good at your job, but it would be a breach of contract for you to discuss me at all with Hannibal. Unfortunately for everyone involved, you’re just entirely incompetent.”

Chilton’s jaw dropped.

Will understood his shock and confusion. When they had last spoken, Will had been too anxious and cowed to have said something so sharp to him. The years of mishandling by psychiatric professionals had left him feeling inadequate and unworthy. Will had been a fragile thing, back then, just like Jack still thought he was.

It gave him some small sense of satisfaction to see Chilton unsure how to react to even this slight show of confidence.

“As much as I’m sure the FBI values your input, I am the one who has found the Ripper, after all these years,” Chilton said at length, though some of the power had left his voice.

That was the only thing Chilton could fall back on. His perceived success in this one thing that he could claim over Will. Will wished he could tell the man he was wrong, just to see that be taken from him as well. But it would ruin everything.

“How *long* has Gideon been under your care?” Will asked pointedly.

Chilton’s face colored slightly. It wasn’t a gentle blush that might have softened him, but rather a dark, blotchy flush that left him looking almost as if he were ill.

“Does Doctor Lecter know what happened to your father?”

Will hunched his shoulders and dropped his eyes back to Chilton's shoes. Tears sprang to his eyes, and he wanted to die. He felt his chest tighten, and his breathing was coming short. He closed his eyes, but only saw the man's cold grey gaze, so he opened them again. Of all things, he had not expected Chilton to throw that back in his face. He had thought it beyond even him.

"Fredrick, any respectability you may once have had is gone. You are purposefully causing Will distress. As he was once your patient, that is not only professionally negligent, but actively malicious. Antagonize someone else."

Hannibal took Will's arm and pulled him to the side, his touch warm and comforting. Will hated himself. He couldn't breathe.

"Will, breathe. Imagine your lungs have been taken from you."

Hannibal's voice was soft, whispered directly into his ear so no one else would hear. It did the trick, and Will pulled in a lungful of air. He wiped at his face, grimacing at the moisture he found there. He hated crying in public. He hated being vulnerable.

"I hate that guy," he said, huffing a bitter laugh, "I should never have gone to him for help. I just thought-"

Hannibal made a soft shushing sound, rubbing his hands over Will's arms in a soothing touch.

"You were trying to get help," he said softly, "Fredrick Chilton takes advantage of those he sees as vulnerable. It was not in any way your mistake."

Will sighed, wishing he could lean in and press his face into Hannibal's chest. He knew it would make him feel safe and calm. But he couldn't. Especially not where people could see.

"I probably should have told you about my dad by now," he said, feeling guilt spear through him at the thought, "I shouldn't have let him use that against me. And you deserve to know."

Hannibal huffed softly.

"I do not deserve your past, Will," he said, "You share what you feel comfortable sharing, and we have made wonderful progress. Do not allow his cruelty to set you back."

Will closed his eyes again, taking a deep breath. This time, all he saw were Hannibal's eyes, dark and warm. He felt better. Not great, but he could probably handle what they had to do, now.

"Alright," he said with a nod and opened his eyes again.

Hannibal smiled when Will met his eyes, and he led Will back to the center of the room with a hand on the small of his back. Solid and reassuring.

Chapter End Notes

I know you were all expecting Freddie to be here and causing problems. While I'm not sorry she's not, I hope you'll accept Fredrick as the replacement antagonist Fred.

Up next: A flashback to Will's college days.

On another note: I have been keeping myself about 10 chapters ahead on this fic so far, so I can always update on my schedule without being rushed. That being said, I have recently had a new idea for a fic that has consumed me nearly as much as this one did at the start. If all goes well, I'll get back to this one before I run out of already written chapters, since I'm 10 ahead, but I can't really predict what's going to happen there. Wish me luck, I guess. XD

35

Chapter Summary

Will comes home from college to be with his daddy for Christmas.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Will! How's college treating you?"

Will grinned, glad to see his dad. College was hard for someone like Will. He was constantly on the verge of a mental breakdown, and everyone thought he was unnerving. He was alright with that, as long as they kept their distance, but sometimes they got it in their head he was a charity project, and just needed someone to reach out. God forbid they think he needs a hug.

"College is great," Will said, "how have you been?"

Monty stepped back into the house, letting Will have his space as he stepped inside. There was a little wreath over the couch on one wall, lit up with little red lights. It was the most Christmas decoration Monty had ever put up as far as Will was aware.

"I've been alright," Monty said, clearly nervous about something, though Will didn't know what, "work has been slow, but I'm getting older, and that's mostly alright. Just so long as I can put food on the table, right? Have you called Officer Lirette recently?"

Will nodded, taking a seat on the couch and accepting the glass of sweet tea his daddy offered.

"Yeah. He says Macy ran away to sing on Broadway. He's worried about her." Will said.

Monty took his own seat in the old recliner, tapping his fingers on his leg as if he was waiting for something to happen.

"I can understand that," Monty said, "she's his only chick, and he hasn't got a clue where she is or what she's doing. She could be dead on the side of the road for all he knows."

Will had a flash of a memory, the man from the basement, his eyes clawed out and his face entirely torn apart and bloody.

"Please don't," Will said, shaking his head to get rid of the images, "I get enough of that from classes."

Monty peered at Will with a mix of curiosity and concern. It was an expression Will was intimately familiar with.

He was honestly surprised Monty was holding his own glass of tea, rather than a beer or whiskey. The past few years, Monty Graham had rarely been entirely sober. Will knew it was partly because of him. The stress of not being able to help his only son, while Will was clearly under so much stress and in so much pain. It had been driving him half mad. Alcohol had been his escape.

Maybe Monty was trying to stop using it as a crutch. Maybe he had realized it was unhealthy, and he was getting better.

“I’ll be damned if I know why you want to study murder anyhow,” Monty said, taking a long gulp from his glass, “God knows you’ve had enough darkness in your life. Most people would run the other way. You’re running toward it, though.”

Will scraped the nail of his thumb under his lip, trying not to overthink and stress himself out. Trying not to think about how sometimes the darkness was a comfort rather than a threat.

“I realized something when I was fourteen,” Will said, trying to sound casual, “I have a knack for understanding people like that. He saw it, and forced me to see it. I might as well capitalize on it, yeah?”

Monty shrugged. Will could see in the set of his shoulders and the precise space between his feet on the warped wood floor that Monty was also feigning his calm and casual posture. He was either hiding something, or he expected something to happen and he wanted to be ready for it.

There was a knock at the door.

Monty grumbled a bit under his breath, but he hefted himself up out of his chair and answered it.

“Hi there, Mister Graham,” a cheery, saturated voice said, “We just thought we’d bring you something to celebrate the season, and we saw you already have company. Is some family visiting?”

Monty shifted his weight and glanced over his shoulder at Will before answering.

“My son is in town for a couple of days,” he said haltingly, “visiting from college.”

Another voice crowed in delight, and Will felt a sinking in the pit of his stomach.

“That’s wonderful, Monty! Can we please meet him? We’d love to share our message with you both!”

Monty sighed heavily, but Will knew he wasn’t going to refuse. That would mean a verbal dispute with these women, and Monty was more tired than usual today.

Monty turned and offered Will an apologetic look.

“Will, would you come say hi?” he asked.

Will set his glass on the coffee table and stood, hoping he would be able to avoid having a bad reaction to them. He knew the type.

The women were standing on the front step with matching bright smiles, the likes of which a blind man would have been able to see. One, wearing a dress the color of lime jello, was holding a plate of Christmas cookies piled so high Will feared an avalanche.

“Oh, aren’t you precious,” the other lady said, her dress the shade of cherry blossoms, “Monty never said you had a face that could break my heart.”

Will shuffled uncomfortably on his feet, staring at their sensibly heeled shoes, each pair matching the accompanying dress.

“Hello,” he said awkwardly, “I’m Will. It’s a pleasure to-”

Before he could finish the reactive greeting, the plate of cookies was shoved toward him, the edge of it actually hitting his chest. Will jumped backwards, hitting the open door and making the plate tip in the woman’s hands, sending cookies tumbling off onto the porch just as he had imagined. He felt his chest tighten, and he fought to keep pulling in breath as images of death and pain flashed in his head.

“Oh, Peggy, you should have warned him at least,” the woman in pink scolded, frowning down at the wasted treats, “Can’t you see he’s nervous? You scared the poor dear.”

“Oh gosh, how silly of me,” Peggy said, not sounding at all worried, “I’m sorry, Will. I just got so excited to give you these. I hope you can forgive me.”

Will nodded, backing away slowly as he tried not to curl into a trembling mess. He didn’t know these people, but he had been so close to accidentally touching her. God. That would have been a disaster. They were nice, and being nice to his daddy. He couldn’t let himself hurt them.

Monty stepped in front of Will, shielding him from their confused faces.

“My son ain’t keen on being touched,” he explained, taking the plate with the remaining cookies, “and you’re right that he’s nervous around strangers. Thank you kindly, but I think you ought to go.”

The women began to protest.

“We hope to see you at church on Christmas,” Peggy said, and it was clear this had been her objective all along, “It is the Lord’s day, after all, and he can help us overcome all our struggles.”

Monty nodded, closing the door in her face. Will knew he had no intention of going to church. He hated being a charity case, and the people at church always saw him as one.

Monty sighed and dropped the plate onto the coffee table, turning to face Will, his face etched with concern.

“Will, you alright son?” he asked, his hands flexing against the instinct to reach out. To touch.

Will shook his head.

“Just-” he gasped, struggling for air, “give me- a minute.- can’t- breathe.”

Monty wrung his hands together, pacing anxiously as Will gasped and choked on the floor of his living room.

Will dug his nails into his hands, relishing in the pain and the grounding quality of the sensation. It felt like half an eternity, but he managed to get his breathing under control, and his heart slowed in its cage.

“I’m alright, daddy,” Will said, and saw the way Monty’s entire body relaxed in relief, “I’ll be fine.”

Monty shook his head. There were tears on his cheeks, and his hands were trembling as he picked up his glass.

“I have a hard time believing any of us will be fine,” he said bitterly, “what kind of God would let it be this way?”

Will smiled and lifted himself off the floor. He stepped over to the table and picked up one of the cookies. It was shaped like an angel, with a yellow frosted halo.

“At least we got some cookies out of it,” he said, desperate to lift his daddy’s spirits, “and you didn’t even have to listen to them preach.”

Monty laughed, though it was tinged with bitter sadness even as he took his own cookie from the plate. This one was a cross that had been comically frosted red and white like a candy cane. Will found that slightly sacrilegious, but it just made him more pleased to have shut the door on them.

“That’s a mercy, anyhow,” Monty said, and took a bite of his cookie. “These are damn good. If she hadn’t basically thrown them at you, I’d feel compelled to write her a thank you note.”

Will laughed.

“Another mercy,” he said.

Chapter End Notes

frolicking I have so much trauma to bestow upon our dear boy! Can I get a wahoo?

Up next: The conference doesn't go exactly to plan, and Hannibal has some words with Jack

36

Chapter Summary

Jack has some words for the reporters, Hannibal has some words for Jack, Will has some words for Hannibal.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“What makes the FBI so sure this is the Ripper?”

Jack nodded to the reporter who had spoken, acknowledging him and dismissing him in one motion.

“We have the best team of people available working on the case,” he said, “there is enough evidence for us to be sure we know.”

Another reporter, clamoring above the crowd.

“Is one of those people Will Graham?”

Many eyes turned on Will, as his presence there answered the spoken question, but would lead into many that had not yet been voiced. He stared at the clock on the opposite wall, keeping his breaths even and slow by tracking the progress of the second hand. His skin crawled with the weight of so many eyes, but he refused to show his discomfort.

Hannibal still noticed, of course, or perhaps just made an educated guess, because he placed his hand at the small of Will’s back once more. The touch was grounding, and Will was grateful for it at the same time as he resented it.

He did not have a keeper, and he did not need one.

“Will Graham is a consultant on the case, working alongside many other experts to see that the truth is revealed,” Jack answered.

Will understood, now. He sometimes wondered how Jack kept his job when he mishandled people so frequently. This was the answer. Jack was good at this, the public appearances and politics. His answers were short, vague, and politic.

“What does Graham have to say about Abel Gideon? Does he really think Gideon is the Ripper?”

Will could see the way Jack tensed, not wanting this to be about Will. Even if Will was the patsy, Jack didn't want him to be.

Will was grateful for that.

"Will Graham agrees with our decision to declare the case closed, as Abel Gideon is the Chesapeake Ripper."

Will bit his tongue, waiting for this to be over.

"On what grounds?"

Will felt his heart drop, and Jack turned around to look at him. Hannibal tensed as well, beside Will, but Will just sighed softly and nodded. Jack smiled and turned back.

"Will Graham will make a short statement, but he will not be answering any questions," Jack stated, then stepped back from the podium.

Will stepped forward, mourning the loss of Hannibal's touch, but didn't step up to the microphone. He waited a bit as all eyes turned to him and the murmur of the crowd quieted.

All at once, he thought of Hobbs, and Stammets, and he felt powerful. He thought of the man from the basement, and he knew he could do this. He had overcome those men, who had stood in his way, and he could overcome this.

"The first murder recreating the wound man image was done by the Chesapeake Ripper," he said, amazed by how clear and strong his own voice sounded, "Because this one has recreated the image so perfectly, we have every reason to believe it was done by the same person. The wound man illustration is an old medical drawing, not commonly known even by those in the medical field. In order to recreate it so perfectly, one would not only have to have medical background, but also be intimately acquainted with the original illustration. For these reasons, among others, we are confident in our conclusion."

Will stepped back into his place, letting the shouts and questions wash over him and fall away. He was suddenly exhausted, but he felt good. He hadn't expected he would be able to do it, but it was over, and he had.

Hannibal's hand was back, and the man leaned in to speak in Will's ear.

"Very well done, Agent Graham," he said.

Will could feel the smile and the warmth in the words, and he couldn't help but smile a bit himself.

Jack handled the questions with the same calm and grace he seemed to reserve specifically for these situations. Will was drained and ready to go home by the end of it, but he was satisfied. Not only would it work, but he had managed to do his part despite his fear, and despite Fredrick Chilton. He really was improving, and maybe now Jack would recognize it.

—

“I find it unprofessional and neglectful of you, Jack,” Hannibal said coldly, “Will should have been made aware of everyone included in the conference before he was pressured to participate. If Will wished it, I would be sure you suffered legal consequences.”

Will was a bit frightened by the intensity of Hannibal’s reaction. He had glimpsed Hannibal’s rage, but had never seen him act on it. Again, he resented the fact that it was being said on his behalf, but he was too tired to be upset.

Jack glanced at Will, apparently surprised by Hannibal’s words as well.

Will shook his head.

“I don’t want to punish you for it, Jack,” Will said, feeling like he wanted to just go to sleep, “It was an unpleasant surprise, but you had no way of knowing how I would react. And, I don’t need anyone defending me right now. I just want to go home.”

Hannibal frowned, instantly concerned rather than angry. He was deflated, as if realizing what he had done was causing Will more stress than it was alleviating. There was a flash of guilt there, as well, and that managed to make Will feel a bit better. Hannibal wasn’t going to completely ignore Will’s wishes in order to do what he thought best. Will hadn’t ever thought he would, but now he could see.

“Alright, Will,” Jack said, nodding. He also looked relieved, likely trusting Hannibal not to retaliate without Will’s consent. “I think we’re done here for today. You can go home.”

Will nodded and stood, taking his coat and his bag. Hannibal walked with him to the door and held it open. Will smiled in thanks, but he was frayed and irritated, so he didn’t trust himself to say anything. Hannibal walked with him out to the parking lot, and Will was unsurprised to see Hannibal’s Bentley was parked right next to his own car. It was a strange dichotomy they made, and it once more showed Will how ill-fitting they really were.

People like Will weren’t made for people like Hannibal.

“Would you like to join me for dinner tonight?” Hannibal asked, “it could serve as an opportunity to relax, and we could talk. Or, we might not. Silence can be just as pleasant as-”

“Stop it,” Will snapped, turning sharply to face Hannibal, his face twisted into a grimace, “Just stop.”

Hannibal stopped, his expression surprised and hurt. Will felt a stab of guilt for making him look that way, but he pushed past it.

“You’re treating me like a child,” Will said, shaking his head, “You always step in before I even have the chance to defend myself. I appreciate you supporting me, I really, always do. But please, just let me ask for it from now on. I feel so helpless when you speak for me like that. And threatening Jack like that? I don’t even know what to say. You know I don’t hold ignorance against people when they make a mistake. If I did, I wouldn’t have finished eating breakfast with you in Minnesota.”

Hannibal blinked, apparently stunned by Will's response. He took half a step backward, away from Will, as if rethinking his decision to stand so close to him. That hurt Will. It struck him straight to the heart, and he clamped his mouth shut against a cry of anguish.

He didn't mean to make Hannibal stop touching him. That wasn't what he wanted. Something needed to change, but he didn't want that to be it.

"I apologize, Will," Hannibal said, his tone and his expression both mournful, "I should have recognized the repercussions of my own actions. I accuse Jack of neglect, yet I have been harming you through my own negligence. All this time, I have been wanting to see you stand proud, but I have been actively holding you back. That is unforgivable."

Will shook his head, wanting Hannibal to stop talking. This wasn't what he wanted.

"I forgive you," he said, and Hannibal froze in place, his eyes widening slightly, "I forgave you before I even started talking to you just now. I just need you to know that something has to change. I know you haven't meant to hurt me, or hold me back. I know, so that's why I had to say something. Because I know you can fix it."

Hannibal nodded, apparently finding it difficult to find the words. That was a rare thing for him, and it made Will smile.

"Cat got your tongue, Doctor Lecter?" he asked, smiling wanly.

Hannibal huffed a soft laugh.

"You are remarkable, Will Graham," he said, "I promise I will do better. I will curb my compulsion to protect you. I will wait for you to ask for my help. I always keep my promises."

Will grinned.

"I know. I'll see you soon."

Will got into his car and waved as he pulled away. Hannibal waved back, smiling despite a lingering bewilderment in his features.

That had gone better than Will had expected. All of it. The conference and the discussion with Hannibal. He hadn't expected to survive the conference, in all honesty. He had expected one thing to send him into an attack and he would suffocate right there in front of all the reporters. He had expected he would spontaneously combust the moment Hannibal was upset with him.

But Hannibal hadn't been upset with him. Hannibal had understood, and had felt guilty.

He had said he felt compelled to protect Will.

Will's face warmed in the car as he thought of that. Hannibal felt compelled to do those things, for Will. He just wanted to protect Will. It wasn't because he didn't think Will could

do it himself, or that Will needed someone to do it. He wasn’t doing it because he felt obligated to do it. Because he was considered Will’s handler. Hannibal just wanted to.

Will had never had anyone who just wanted to.

Oh, he wished he could have Hannibal. Just have him.

Maybe, if he got better enough, he could do something. Maybe, he would find the courage to say something, to find out if Hannibal really felt anything in return.

Maybe.

Chapter End Notes

Hannibal getting really, really close to just confessing his love when Will gets upset with him XD Always a delight.

Up next: Christmas gets closer for the Grahams, but there's something off about Monty. Oh yeah, and Will runs into someone he didn't want to see, and learns something he didn't want to know.

XD <3 enjoy~

37

Chapter Summary

> Will and his dad spend some more time together before Christmas. A nosy reporter does what such people do.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Daddy, are you sure you're alright?" Will asked, for what felt like the hundredth time that day.

Monty Graham wiped his sweaty hands on his shorts, again, and shook his head.

"Damn it, Will. I told you I'm fine. Stop pestering me."

Will pressed his lips together. He was getting more and more worried about his daddy. Monty wasn't normally this irritable. His hands were shaking as he tried to put the hook on the line, and he had been sweating profusely for the past hour.

It was hot out, of course. They were in Georgia, after all. But Will was still worried. Other than the sweating, the other things were still concerning enough on their own. Monty hadn't snapped at Will in a long time. This was the first time since the kidnapping, maybe. Monty had never had much of a temper with Will. He fiercely defended Will if anyone dared to try to hurt him, but he wasn't angry or violent. He was kind and gentle.

Monty sighed, shaking his head as if he wanted to get something out of it.

"I'm sorry, Will," he said, "I shouldn't have snapped. I don't know what's wrong with me today."

Will smiled, but he was still worried.

"Don't worry about it. Maybe we should just go home. I think we might both be tired."

Monty considered it, staring at the surface of the little pond they were fishing at. It was as if he wanted to memorize it, as if this was the last time. That frightened Will more.

"I just want us to have a nice time," Monty said, "I feel like I only get these few visits to make up for everything I didn't do for you when you were growing up. If I were a better man, I would do so much more."

Will sighed, smiling wider and shaking his head.

“Aw, daddy. You don’t have to feel like that. You know-”

Will was cut off when Monty suddenly jerked forward and vomited onto the ground between his feet. Will was so startled he jumped to his feet, but stood frozen, unable to touch his father to offer help or comfort. He just watched, wide eyed and helpless, as Monty spat out the last of it and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

“I guess we ought to go home,” Monty said, looking up at Will sheepishly, “I’m feeling a mite under the weather after all.”

Will nodded and began packing up his fishing gear.

“I’ll drive,” he said, “you just rest up. Tomorrow, we’ll just sit on the couch all day and watch stupid movies. I’ll cook and everything.”

Monty smiled, packing his own gear and standing to go with Will to the truck.

“I might not have been a very good father, but you’re a wonderful son,” he said.

Will felt as if someone was squeezing his heart. It hurt him to hear his daddy say something like that, especially because he felt like there was nothing he could do to change how Monty felt.

“I love you,” he said, “and I wouldn’t ask for anyone else.”

Monty smiled tiredly, and Will noticed he was wavering on his path to the truck. Will would have thought he was drunk, if he didn’t know for certain that Monty hadn’t had a drop to drink all day. Will hadn’t even seen any alcohol in the house. He thought his daddy had gone and gotten sober.

“Let’s go home, Will.”

Will drove them home.

—

“Funny how you’re so adamant Gideon is the killer, when you never even went to the Hospital to see the scene or interview him. Why was that, Professor Graham?”

“You’re Freddie Lounds,” Will shot back, “Shouldn’t you know? You seem to know everything else about me.”

He just wanted to get to his car. It had been a long day, and he was tired. On top of that, he still wasn’t sure where he stood with Hannibal. They hadn’t really talked since Will had snapped at him, but their usual appointment time was tomorrow. Hannibal was probably waiting for Will to reach out.

He was working himself up to it.

“Oh, I could find out any of ten ways, professor,” Freddie said brightly, “but I thought you might want to put in a word before I ask Doctor Chilton.”

Will bit his tongue, cursing himself for engaging with her. More, he cursed Chilton for everything he had ever done. Will wished he had been able to escape the man years ago, when he first realized talking to him wouldn’t help.

“Your website is a joke, Lounds,” he said, pulling out his keys, “anyone who reads it is a fool, and anyone who believes the bullshit you write is an ignorant sycophant. I wouldn’t answer your questions even if I thought you were likely to write something that put me in a good light.”

Will reached for his door, but Freddie stepped in his way. He immediately stopped, snatching his hand back. He cursed himself for the reaction when he saw her posture straighten with triumph. She had made a connection.

“It’s true that you can’t stand physical contact with almost anyone?” she asked, “From the pictures from the press conference, I had thought that was nothing more than a rumor.”

Will felt himself pale.

“What pictures?” he asked, but he knew.

Freddie dodged it.

“Is it because of the intense trauma you suffered as a young teen, at the hands of Steven Walters?”

Will closed his eyes, forcing himself to see a field of mushrooms, a row of exposed hands with IVs attached. It calmed his anger, and he opened his eyes again.

“I’m not talking to you, Freddie,” he said carefully, “now step away from my car before I call an agent to remove you. I’m sure they could make a case for stalking.”

Freddie’s brow furrowed, possibly wondering if they could really do that. Will didn’t care much, at that point, and she did move out of the way, which had been the goal.

Will smiled politely and drove away, pleased with himself for having dealt with that on his own. He was getting better.

Will should call Hannibal. Ask him where they would have their session.

He settled for a text once he got home.

Almost immediately, he got a reply.

-My home, if that suits. I would like to cook for you.-

Will smiled. Things hadn’t changed too much.

-That suits just fine. See you then.-

That was good. Hannibal hadn't decided to step back and make them meet at his office, like doctor and patient. They were still friends.

Will was improving. The bad days were few and far between, and the good days were getting better. He could see the change in his own behavior. He knew he was getting better.

The pictures were exactly what Will had expected.

Several shots of himself, facing Hannibal who had a hand on Will's arm as they spoke. Then, he was turned to face Chilton, his back close to Hannibal's chest. Then, after Chilton had tried to touch him. Those were what Freddie would consider the true money shots. He was pressed up against Hannibal's chest, with the man's hands gripping his elbows.

There shouldn't have been any pictures taken at that time. The conference hadn't started, and the reporters hadn't even been let into the room yet.

Had Hannibal seen them yet? Did he know about all of this? He hadn't said anything to Will about it, but would he? Will didn't know.

Freddie Lounds hadn't taken them. She hadn't been invited to the conference, which might have made her bitter. These pictures had come from someone else, who had snuck in to take them.

Probably some lucky intern who was now the office favorite. They hadn't had any way of knowing anything interesting would happen, but they had gotten lucky, and this was the result.

There was also a picture of Hannibal, leaning in to speak in Will's ear, and Will was smiling. That moment had been caught by several photographers, but Will wished they would all just leave him alone. He shouldn't have been the focus of this all. The point was the Ripper. Getting a reaction out of the Ripper.

It would work, but it might also have the unintended side effect of drawing the Ripper's attention to Will.

Again, Will was in the sights of a serial killer. It hadn't taken them long to put him back in this position, and this time it was the Ripper. The most dangerous, most skilled, most prolific killer in the country. They were dangling Will in front of them like bait.

And it would work.

Will realized he very well might be the next victim of the Ripper. He was the face of the investigation, and had pointed everyone in the direction of Abel Gideon being the Ripper. He had actually spoken at the conference, and now everyone would know.

He was the one perpetuating the lie. He was to blame. If anyone was going to be punished for this, Will would be high on the list of most likely.

Will considered mentioning it to Jack, but after how things had gone down with Eldon Stammets, he doubted it would help any. Jack would want a security detail at Will's house, which would absolutely not work. It would make Jack panic more than anything, and Will knew they weren't likely to stop the Ripper from doing basically whatever they wanted.

Will would just have to hope and not let himself get too wrapped up in how he imagined the Ripper would display him. That was a slippery slope, and people already thought he was mentally unstable.

But he wanted to. He wanted to think about it. He wondered if the Ripper would take requests.

That was bad to think about. He needed to stop before he got himself admitted to the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane.

This would have to be dealt with eventually, but Will would be happy to put it off for a while yet.

Chapter End Notes

Anyone want to place bets on whether or not Hannibal knew they were being photographed at the time?

Up next: Will talks out his fears with Hannibal, and the Christmas saga concludes.

38

Chapter Summary

We find out what happened with Will's dad, and Hannibal learns even more about Will.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will's worry for his father was growing. He had hardly touched the soup Will had put together, was clearly having a hard time not snapping again, and hadn't stopped sweating despite the air conditioning in his little house. Will had cranked it all the way up when they had gotten back from fishing, afraid it was a heat related illness. He had given Monty large glasses of water and sweet tea, wanting to be sure he was hydrated. Nothing seemed to make a difference.

Despite this, Monty continued to insist he was fine, and didn't need to go to the doctor. He claimed it was just a bug that had been going around, and he would get over it. Will couldn't help doubting it, but he didn't like doctors, and wasn't too keen on the idea of going to a hospital himself. He thought he would reevaluate the situation tomorrow. Christmas eve. What a good day for a doctor's visit.

For the time being, Will glanced over at where his daddy had fallen asleep on the couch, a bowl nearby in case the nausea returned, and a ginger ale sitting beside it. His hair was pushed back from his face, damp from his continued sweating, and it revealed just how thin and grey it had become in the past years.

Will felt a pang of sorrow, seeing how his dad had aged. It wouldn't have been so bad if Monty could retire in a nice place, secure in the knowledge that his son was stable and well adjusted. Then, he could enjoy the fact that he had survived so much, and earned such a rest. But the world had dealt him a poorer hand than that, and he was wearing himself out.

He looked pale and vulnerable, and Will was sad. He couldn't do anything to help, either. Will was a broke college student, barely scraping by while he tried to get a degree. He was haunted by his past, and unable to even offer comfort to his aging father.

Will got back to work, cleaning the dishes they had used and just generally tidying up. His daddy was no slob, but he had never been the most organized of men either. After a long day of work, he didn't expend the energy to clean more than necessary.

Will had inherited the habit, though he had been keeping his dorm room at college neat as a pin. He didn't have enough possessions to really clutter up the space, and he was afraid of doing anything that would threaten his place in the school. He couldn't afford to get kicked out because of a failed inspection.

Monty made a soft chuffing sound in his sleep, a crease forming in his brow as he tossed his head a bit. A fresh sheen of sweat had broken out on his face, and Will's frown deepened.

If Monty wasn't better tomorrow, Will would take him to the doctor.

—

"You seem anxious tonight, Will," Hannibal said, handing him one of the knives, "Is there something bothering you?"

Will smiled wryly. If anyone else had told him he seemed anxious, Will would have laughed. He was always anxious.

But not Hannibal. Even though Will continued to have uncomfortable dreams about him, and wanted so much, Hannibal still managed to put Will at ease. More than that, he was the only person who could really tell how Will was feeling, behind all the constant fear.

"I'm worried," Will confessed, beginning to chop the vegetables Hannibal gave him.

Hannibal glanced over at Will from the stove, his expression open and concerned.

"Are you beginning to doubt your plan?" he asked, "I still believe it is the most likely thing to work, and it is a bit late at this juncture."

Will shook his head and sighed softly.

"It's not that," he said, "I'm worried about you."

Hannibal tipped his head curiously.

"Whatever for?" he asked.

Will chewed on his lip a bit as he tried to put the words together. He knew Hannibal would allow him time to think.

"After what happened with Eldon Stammets, we decided I wouldn't be in the public eye," he began, and Hannibal nodded, "well, now I'm not only in the public eye, but I'm the face and the voice of the investigation. If the Ripper decides to target someone in the investigation, it's likely to be me. But if they just want to hurt or scare me, they'll go after you, the way Eldon did."

Hannibal was silent for a moment, and Will worried about what he would say.

"Have you voiced your concerns with Jack Crawford?" he asked.

Will shook his head again, looking down at his work sheepishly.

"Nothing Jack can do will stop them," he said softly.

Hannibal huffed a laugh and shook his head.

“You say that, knowing you are the true target, yet I am the one you are worried for?” he asked, “Do you honestly think the Ripper is the type to use scare tactics on you?”

Will set the knife down, closing his eyes tightly. He was afraid Hannibal would ask about this.

“No,” he said, “If the Ripper is unhappy with me, they’ll most likely come after me directly.”

That was, unless Will was out of reach in some way, or the Ripper had a reason not to. Will couldn’t be entirely sure there wasn’t something he wasn’t accounting for, but the most likely outcome of this would be the Ripper coming after Will. One way or the other.

Hannibal nodded.

“Then why am I the one you fear will be hurt?” he asked.

“Because that’s *always* what happens,” Will snapped, gripping the edge of the counter until his fingers turned white, “the people I care about, the people I like, the people I *touch* . They’re always the ones who get hurt, while I’m stuck *living* in a world where it’s my fault. Because I allowed myself to get close, when *I knew* it was dangerous.”

Hannibal was at Will’s side in a flash, taking his shoulders and turning Will to face him.

“You don’t want to hurt me, do you, Will?” he asked.

Will realized his breathing had become fast and shallow. Under Hannibal’s touch, he consciously slowed it, finding it easier to calm down with Hannibal there. Of course it was.

He was addicted to him.

Will pushed that away as he faced the question Hannibal had asked.

“Of course not,” he said.

Hannibal nodded.

“But there are people you *would* like to hurt,” he said.

Will didn’t answer, afraid and shocked by the words. Hannibal just nodded as if Will had confirmed it.

“Yes. Your anger and fear push you ever closer to the desire to hurt those that wrong you. Tell me who you would hurt, now, if you could choose.”

Without stopping to think of how strange and wrong it was for Hannibal to ask that of him, Will answered.

“Chilton. Lounds. I just-” he choked a bit with the intensity of his waking anger, “I want them to know how I feel. How they make me feel. Like a hunted animal.”

Hannibal's eyes flashed with something Will couldn't catch because it was gone too fast. Then, there was just a warm smile.

"Remember. You can choose what happens. You are far stronger than you give yourself credit for."

Will scoffed.

"I'm beginning to question your taste in friends, Doctor Lecter," he said, "all I ever do is ask you for things. I never offer you anything in return. Why do you still choose to spend time with me?"

Hannibal shook his head as if he was bewildered by Will's words. Maybe he was. Will knew people weren't just friends with other people if it was mutually beneficial. People couldn't always control how they felt about those they came into contact with. He hadn't chosen to fall in love with Hannibal, so why did he think Hannibal must have chosen to enjoy Will's company? He was expecting too much from him. Again.

"I am a hedonist at heart," Hannibal said, still smiling, "I think anything enjoyable should be enjoyed to the fullest extent. I enjoy your presence, your thoughts, your company, and your smile. That is why I so desire to help you find joy in your world, and share it with you as much as I can."

Will couldn't speak. He felt as if that was the closest Hannibal ever came to declaring his love.

Hannibal loved him back. There was no other explanation for all of this, at least not a satisfactory one. It had to be true. Hannibal loved Will.

And it was not simply desire in the way Hannibal labeled himself a hedonist. If that was it, he would have made a move long before. No, it must be real, because he was waiting. Waiting for Will to be well enough he could reciprocate. Hannibal would not push Will into a panic attack simply in the hopes that he could get what he wanted.

Because he took joy in Will's joy. That must be what it meant to love someone.

But Will was broken. He could never really give Hannibal what he wanted. He felt sure of it. Despite all the progress he had made, the man had taken that from him all those years ago.

Will offered a weak, wavering smile.

"I appreciate all you do," he said, "I'm really glad you're my friend."

Hannibal nodded, giving Will's shoulders a brief squeeze before dropping his hands and stepping away.

The words Will said had hurt. They had burned on the way out, feeling like damnation when they had meant to be mercy.

If he was a kinder man, he would cut this tie. This bind. He wouldn't let Hannibal think there was a chance.

But he was selfish, and he was addicted.

He remembered the day he realized he had become addicted to the chloroform the man had used on him. How he had been awash in despair and fear, but felt as if it was only fair. Addiction was a simple consequence of prolonged or frequent exposure to something that made the chemicals in one's brain fire off. He had made this happen to himself just as much as the man had done it to him the first time.

"My daddy died on Christmas Eve when I was twenty," Will said as Hannibal resumed his work at the stove, "Delirium Tremens. He was trying to get sober. For me. Because he wanted to be a better father for me. I was there, and I put off taking him to the doctor until it was too late."

Hannibal looked at Will, sorrow etched in his features. Will nodded.

"That's what Chilton was talking about before the conference. I'm the reason my daddy is dead."

That was true three times over. Will was the reason Monty had begun drinking in the first place. He was the reason Monty had wanted to get sober. He had failed to take him to the doctor in time.

Will had failed his daddy.

In Hannibal's eyes, Will saw that he understood all of this. Perhaps this was another case in which they were alike. Maybe Hannibal felt the same way about his sister. Maybe he saw himself, before his own miraculous recovery, in the way Will was now.

Maybe he knew a way to help.

"Sometimes, Will, we can neither change nor run from the past," Hannibal said calmly, a deceptive calm, like an ocean gearing up for a storm, "and though we fear it, and what it may make us become, we must accept the past, and allow it to become a part of us. Fighting it only succeeds in making us alienated from our true nature."

Will picked up the knife again, frowning as he continued to chop the vegetables.

That wasn't what he had expected, and he didn't entirely know what to make of it.

Chapter End Notes

There we have it. Monty Graham died on Christmas eve, trying to improve himself. No wonder Will isn't a fan of God.

Up next: Young Will goes to that school counselor he was told about, and older Will talks to Hannibal about the pictures.

39

Chapter Summary

Will learns that there are some people in the role of therapist that really shouldn't be. Hannibal learns that Will has been thinking about the Ripper an awful lot.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Who are you here to see?”

Will chewed his lip, his eyes skating around the office and not landing anywhere. He was already starting to think this had been a mistake. He was uncomfortable, and he knew he wasn’t likely to become more comfortable any time soon. He was here in order to be vulnerable, which caused his anxiety to skyrocket just by thinking about it. But he wanted to get better. He wanted to improve.

“Miles Henry,” he said, lifting the scrap of paper Miss Grant had given him, “I have a note from my teacher.”

The young woman behind the desk furrowed her brow but glanced down the hall and nodded.

“He’s not busy right now, so you can go ahead and go in,” she said.

Will nodded and mumbled a thank you as he headed toward the door with the name Henry on it.

The door was propped open, and a man was sitting behind a desk, typing away on his computer. Will stood in the doorway for a moment, shifting his weight on his feet. Mister Henry looked up and startled slightly, then smiled warmly.

“Please, come in and close the door,” he said, gesturing to a chair in front of his desk, “how can I help you?”

Will stepped in and closed the door, feeling his heart begin to beat faster with his fear. He put the note on the desk and made sure his hand was out of reach when the man picked it up.

“I’m Will Graham,” he said quietly, “Miss Grant told me to talk to you.”

Henry read the note quickly, nodding smartly before putting it into one of his desk drawers. His entire room was as neat as a pin, and Will wondered if he was compulsively neat to the point of obsession, or if he was just well organized and put together.

“Well, Will, can I ask why you came today? Has something happened today that you need to talk about?”

Will scraped the nail of his thumb under his lip. He thought of the class he had just left, and how the teacher had wanted them to work in groups. No one had wanted to have Will in their group except a few boys who only wanted to see if they could find out what he had done to escape the basement, and probably send him into another panic attack just to see if they could. He had been dealing with situations like that all year, in almost every class. As far as he could tell, his ability to handle it hadn’t been improving at all.

“It’s not just what happened today,” Will said hesitantly, “I would just like to get better, you know?”

Henry tipped his head. Will wanted to know what he was thinking, but he didn’t dare meet his eyes.

“Can you tell me some of the problems you are experiencing?” Henry asked, “what are some things you would like to work on?”

Will pulled harder against his lip, feeling the sting.

“I can’t touch anyone,” he began, “I can’t meet anyone’s eyes. I’m always afraid. There are certain things that always send me into a panic attack. I just can’t keep going like this. I want to get better.”

Henry considered that for a moment, spinning back and forth in his chair a bit. He didn’t seem as worried as Will felt he should be.

Then, Henry sat forward and set his elbows on the desk.

“Look at me, Will.”

Will froze, and he reactively snapped his eyes up to meet Henry’s gaze.

His head filled with a rush of noise, and he felt his chest constrict. He smelled rotting fruit, and he couldn’t breathe. He remembered the man, and his cold, grey eyes.

Henry didn’t care about making Will better. He didn’t care about helping. He just wanted to find out what made him special. He had heard about what Will could do, and just wanted to see it at work. He wanted to study Will, not help him.

And his eyes were cold and grey, just like the mans.

“Will?”

He was talking, but his voice was muffled and far away. Will was gasping and choking on each breath, unable to get any air into his lungs. His vision began to fade, and Will pushed himself away from the man, toward the door. He needed to get out. To get away.

The world went dark.

—

“Have you seen the pictures from the conference?” Will asked as he helped Hannibal set their places at the table.

Hannibal glanced up at him curiously, either because he hadn’t seen them or because he had. Will couldn’t tell which yet.

“I can’t imagine there is anything to be concerned about regarding pictures of Jack speaking,” Hannibal said, then added thoughtfully, “or of you when you spoke. You looked just as fine as ever.”

Will felt his face heat a bit, but shook his head.

“Not those pictures,” he said, “someone managed to sneak in early. They took pictures of you and I during the thing with Chilton.”

Hannibal paused, pensive and considering.

“I can see how that may be distressing to you,” he said, “removed of context, they could paint a picture that has uncomfortable implications.”

Will nodded.

“I just wanted you to be aware. It’s one of the reasons I’m worried about you. If anyone wanted to get to me, after those pictures, they would go after you.”

Hannibal smiled and set their food out as Will took his seat.

“I am grateful for your concern, Will, but I assure you I can take care of myself.”

Will remembered how Hannibal had looked, unconscious and laying on the ground as Eldon dug a shallow grave. He couldn’t help being a bit skeptical.

He didn’t doubt Hannibal’s general capabilities, because he knew how smart and capable Hannibal was. He was quick to act in an emergency, and almost always knew the best course of action. Hannibal was toned and strong, and could probably hold his own in a fight.

But Eldon had gotten the drop on him, and the Ripper was so much better than he had been. The Ripper wouldn’t be stopped.

Just thinking about what the Ripper might do to Hannibal filled Will with conflicting emotions. He was petrified at the concept of losing Hannibal, of having him taken by someone so dangerous, being hurt or tortured and killed. But at the same time, he would make such a beautiful tableaux. Will couldn’t help but want to see what kind of art piece the Ripper would create out of Hannibal’s flesh.

Will wondered what Hannibal would think of that if he told him. He expected Hannibal wouldn’t be horrified or disgusted. He knew better now. But he still felt anxious about it, and didn’t think he would tell him. At least not yet.

“I don’t want you to get hurt,” Will said, feeling the void those words failed to fill. They just weren’t enough in any way.

“I know.”

They ate in silence for a while, allowing Will to think of everything that could possibly happen, could go wrong or go right.

“Do you ever wonder what the Ripper would do with you?” Hannibal asked, tearing Will from his dark musings.

He looked up at Hannibal, frowning. It was like Hannibal had read his mind, laying out the secrets of his thought to see the light of day instead of allowing Will to hide them away forever.

“What do you mean?” Will asked, not wanting to answer a question Hannibal hadn’t asked.

Hannibal either didn’t notice or chose not to react to Will’s hedging.

“You know you are a likely target. I expect you have given at least some thought to what would happen were they to get to you. I would like to know what you imagine when you think of it.”

Will nodded to show he understood the request, but didn’t answer just yet. He didn’t know exactly what Hannibal expected to hear, or wanted to hear, or what he hoped to gain from learning this. Regardless, Will knew he would tell him. He would tell him everything. He was helpless to resist it. Hannibal had a pull on him, and now Will knew a lie would not be believed. In some way, by some miracle, Hannibal could tell when Will lied. He was the only person who could do that, and Will didn’t know how.

Will closed his eyes, for once not being assaulted with the immediate image of the cold grey eyes that had haunted him all these years. He would speak more freely if he wasn’t looking at Hannibal while he did, and he wanted to see it while he spoke.

“It would be beautiful,” Will admitted, unaware how breathless he sounded when he did, “I know the Ripper would make something beautiful out of my flesh. A painting worthy of the renaissance. For my transgression, I imagine he would remove my tongue. He might remove my eyes as well, for being blind enough to believe Gideon was he. I wonder if he would take my eyes with him, though I don’t think so. He might use them in the design.”

Will saw brushstrokes coming together against his eyelids, creating a picture of something beautiful with his face. Hannibal didn’t speak, allowing him to continue as he always did. Will was less aware of his presence, consumed by the image his mind was painting.

“The punishment would fit the crime, I think. The Ripper uses transgressors of lesser law merely as a medium through which he creates, but for what I have done it would be a crucifixion. I’ve slandered his name. I’ve made a mockery of him. He would remove my organs while I’m still alive, probably while I’m conscious so I know what’s happening. He would want me to know why I’m dying.”

Will pulled in a sharp breath, feeling his pulse quicken with excitement. It was the wrong response, but he didn't even notice. He was too deep.

"He would turn me into something meaningful. Something as a message to others, as well as a testament to his own work. I hope he would reference something powerful, turn me into a tragedy. I think that would be lovely."

Will took a moment to soak in the picture, imagining himself as a piece of art. Something molded by capable hands to become something beautiful.

When Will opened his eyes, he was shunted back to reality and the realization of what he had just said to Hannibal.

If Hannibal hadn't already worried Will was self-destructive, he most certainly would now.

But when Will met Hannibal's gaze, his eyes dark like warm honey, he saw no hint of concern or disappointment. No disgust or horror. Hannibal was looking at Will with open admiration.

"You see the Ripper so clearly," Hannibal said, his tone nearly reverent, "What secrets may be revealed when you see his work in person."

Will flushed, feeling all at once pleased and embarrassed at having lost himself in his mind for a moment. He hadn't ever done that before. He had confessed having a strange relationship with his work, but never cut himself open to show it. Now, he lay flayed for Hannibal's eyes, and was not rejected.

"I don't know, but I really want to find out," he admitted.

Hannibal smiled.

Chapter End Notes

Will finally told Hannibal how he feels... about the Ripper kills. Can't win them all, I guess.

Up next: Will does some research, and Jack might have some exciting news for him.

40

Chapter Summary

> Lirette convinces Will to take a closer look at some footage, and Jack calls at an inconvenient time with what could be a delightful surprise.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Will! How are you doing, son?"

Will smiled, his heart flipping with anxiety, remembering what he had told Hannibal. Lirette didn't sound any worse than he had last time they talked, but he didn't sound any better either. He still sounded like a man on death's doorstep.

"I'm alright," he said, "I don't suppose you saw the pictures from the press conference."

Lirette coughed, and it was awful. Will's mind supplied him with a horrible image of Lirette coughing until blood poured from his mouth, pieces of lung tissue like debris in the flow. He tried to push it away, but the image stuck like tar.

"That big'un about the Chesapeake Ripper?" Lirette asked.

"Yeah," Will agreed, "that's the one."

"You bet your britches I saw it," Lirette said, "I watched the whole thing on my little bedside television, and after, I looked it up to see what they're saying about it. Looks to me like you dodged a bullet with this guy. He could be really dangerous."

Will wanted to set Lirette straight, tell him the truth because he hated lying and this felt like lying to him. But he decided he would just fill Lirette in once everything came out. And he would apologize.

There were other things on his mind at the moment, though.

"That's not why I brought it up, and you know better," Will said.

Lirette chuckled softly.

"You want my opinion on this Doctor Lecter fellow you were seen canoodling with," he said.

Will raised an eyebrow at the use of the word canoodling, but didn't say anything about it. He knew Lirette was just teasing him.

“Well, he’s the one I told you about, and it’s not as if I could call my daddy to talk about him,” Will said, feeling a little silly for it.

Lirette hummed in agreement.

“Besides the fact I think you look good together, it’s pretty damn clear he makes you happy,” he said, “Hell, he had his hands on you almost the whole time, and you were fine with it. If that’s not a miracle I don’t know what is.”

Will felt his face heat, and he wondered if he should just pretend he and Hannibal had gotten together, just to make Lirette happy.

But that would be lying, too.

“I still don’t like being touched by most people,” he said, remembering when Chilton had tried to touch him with a shudder, “But he does make me happy. I want to be around him all the time, and I like to make him smile. I don’t know what being in love is like, but I think this must be something like it.”

And there it was. Will had said the words aloud. He may not have outright admitted he was in love with Hannibal, but he had stopped just short of it. Almost anyone could fill in the blanks there. Will knew Lirette would.

“I think love is different for everyone, and I wouldn’t try to force my definition on you,” Lirette said, and Will could hear the smile in his voice, “but for you, that sounds about right. You’ve always kept to yourself, even when you were sitting on your chair in my house, or eating Caroline’s gumbo. If you feel good opening up to him, I’d say that’s love.”

Will felt his chest fill with warmth as his mind filled with images of Hannibal. Every time he had smiled at Will. Every time he had comforted Will. Every time he had opened up himself, being vulnerable for Will.

“Don’t you let him go, Will. Don’t punish yourself for being hurt. You deserve to be happy,” Lirette said, and it was real, like he was expressing his honest hopes for the future.

Lirette didn’t know that Will was struggling with feeling selfish for doing just that. He didn’t know Will was worried he wouldn’t be able to be what Hannibal wanted, or give him what he needed. Lirette didn’t know how hard it would be for Will to have Hannibal. He knew it would be hard, but not to what extent.

“What if I can’t be what he wants?” Will asked, his voice coming out pained and small, “What if I can’t make him happy the way he makes me?”

Lirette sighed softly, an understanding sound.

“I suggest you go and watch that press conference, son,” he said, “Watch the doctor’s face while you’re talking to them all. You won’t believe me when I tell you, but you might believe your own eyes. You can see things like that. It’s your gift.”

Will was silent for a moment, his head filled with that thought. Lirette was right. Will could see things like that. If he watched it now, removed from the moment just as the frustrating pictures had been, he might be able to look more objectively. He could see the reality of it. He could see if Hannibal really felt the same way, or wanted more than Will could give.

“You’re saying you could see what he wants, when you watched it?” Will asked.

Lirette coughed.

“I’m saying you already make him happy, and I’ll bet you’ll be able to see what he wants if you see the way he looked at you during that conference. Then, you can decide what to do about it.”

Will huffed a soft laugh. It was such a simple answer. One he should have thought of on his own. But, of course, he was far too close to the situation, and was struggling to think about it without spiraling into self doubt.

“That’s why you’re the best,” Will said, “you always pull me back to earth when I get spacey. You’ve always been better at this kind of thing than me.”

Lirette chuckled softly.

“Now that’s cleared up, tell me about your case. Not too much detail, obviously, but how’s it going? How are your coworkers handling it? Are you gonna have to testify?”

Will huffed again.

“I really can’t tell you much,” he said, “but I expect there won’t be another trial for Abel Gideon. He’s already in prison, without a chance of getting out. I’m not worried about him.”

That was the truth. He wasn’t worried about Abel Gideon at all. He was worried Lirette would see Will’s face on the television again soon, and it would be because the Ripper had killed him. That would not be pleasant. He didn’t want that to happen to Lirette.

“Well, I’m proud of you. I either say that too much or not enough, but I want you to know it. I’m proud of the man you are, and the growth you’re showing.”

Will smiled.

“Thanks. I really appreciate it.”

—

Will turned on the conference, watching himself and Hannibal closely. He muted it, finding all the noise of the room distracting, and the things he and Hannibal said to each other hadn’t been picked up my the microphones. Not that he didn’t remember what they had said. He was immediately embarrassed by how blatantly he had been showing his own feelings through his body language. He knew it only felt that way because he already knew how he felt, and others wouldn’t have noticed as quickly as him. That didn’t stop him from feeling humiliated.

But Hannibal. Will was transfixed by Hannibal. By his every elegant movement. He moved like a dancer, aware of every part of his body and everyone around him. His kinesthesia was absolutely phenomenal, and Will was genuinely a little envious.

What Lirette must have seen was clear to Will, now. Hannibal almost never took his eyes from Will for the duration of the conference. When Will stepped away, Hannibal's hand followed until contact broke of necessity, and he reached out again as Will stepped back, minimizing the loss of contact. As if he wanted to be touching Will for himself, rather than solely for Will's comfort.

And Hannibal looked happy. It might not have been obvious to anyone else, but Will had been obsessed with the man for a while now, and had memorized his tells. At the conference, dealing with such a serious and sober topic, Hannibal had been happy. Really happy.

The expression on his face as Will had spoken to the press, and the smile as he leaned in to praise him, he was likely the happiest Will had ever seen him.

Will made him happy. He was already happy with Will, even though they were just friends. If Will couldn't give him anything more, Hannibal would still be happy.

Will just had to work up the courage to do something about it. Say something.

—

Will frowned at his phone, not really wanting to talk to Jack at the moment. He was about to leave to see Hannibal, and he was hoping to do something about the way he felt tonight. They would probably need to talk about it, establish new boundaries and all that. If things went well.

Will really hoped Hannibal would kiss him.

But he couldn't ignore Jack.

"Hey, Jack," Will said, "What's up?"

"Will," Jack said, and that one word was enough for Will to know he was excited about something, "Are you on your way to Doctor Lecter's?"

Will closed his eyes, knowing Jack wanted him to cancel dinner with Hannibal.

"Not yet. I was just about to leave."

"Well, get going, but come here instead. I'll send you the address. It's the Ripper. I need you here."

Will's heart skipped in his chest, excited at the idea that the plan had worked so quickly, and he would get to see a Ripper scene. It felt like he had been waiting for a long time to see one.

"Alright, I'm on my way," he said, grabbing his keys and heading out the door, "You're sure it's him?"

“Pretty sure,” Jack said, “same pattern. But I need you here to confirm.”

Will was already pulling away from the house, feeling like a kid on their birthday, just waiting for all the gifts. He would have to calm down before he got there. It wasn’t a good look for an agent.

Jack got off quickly and sent the address.

Will called Hannibal.

“Will,” Hannibal said warmly, almost enough to distract Will from the matter at hand, “What can I do for you?”

Will shook his head against the gentle guilt at having to cancel. Hannibal would understand.

“I have to cancel tonight, Hannibal,” he said, “Jack has a scene, and he’s sure it’s the Ripper. I’m on my way there now. He might call you in, or he might wait until I get a look. God. I’m finally going to see a Ripper scene.”

Hannibal was silent for a moment, processing everything Will had said.

“I am pleased for you, Will,” he said eventually, “Though I admit I will be sorry to miss our usual dinner together. Do you believe it is the Ripper?”

Will frowned, not sure why Hannibal would be asking him before he had even seen it.

Will thought of the address. It was a motel, and not a particularly nice one. Something clanged discordantly in his mind about that, but he shook it off.

“I hope it is,” he answered honestly, “But I won’t know until I see it.”

Hannibal hummed in agreement.

“I only fear Jack may be seeing shapes in the shadows. He had a personal stake in this case, after all. Do not allow yourself to become blind as well, Will.”

Will took a slow breath. He knew Hannibal was right, as much ash he wished he wasn’t. He wanted it to be the Ripper.

“Okay. Yeah. That’s fair. I probably needed to hear that. Either way, I’m still going to miss dinner and I’m sorry. It’s really short notice.”

Hannibal made a sound of agreement.

“If you find yourself with more time than you expect, please stop by. I enjoy feeding you.”

Will’s face heated with a blush, and he smiled.

“I know,” he said, “I’ll try to come by. See you later, Hannibal.”

“Until then.”

Chapter End Notes

Conversation about feelings successfully postponed.

Up next: Will gets a little hot under the collar at a crime scene

41

Chapter Summary

Will is disappointed, but takes a step that surprises everyone.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will internally groaned. He hadn't even seen the body yet, but he knew it wasn't the Ripper.

There were streaks of blood and spatter everywhere. It was a mess.

To Jack, also desperate for the Ripper to come back, it could seem staged. As if the Ripper had painted that all himself, but Will could see.

It was a mistake. One mistake had resulted in a mess.

The Ripper doesn't make mistakes.

"In here, Will," Jack called from the bathroom at the back.

Will drifted over, feeling suddenly angry and aggravated.

"His kidney's missing. Organ removal. Staged scene. Just like the Ripper."

Will looked dispassionately at the dead man in the tub. Even the torn sutures and surgical incision were wrong. Not neat, not precise, enough. It was so glaring. Will wondered why Jack couldn't see it.

The colors of the room and the blood, paired with the position of the body, reminded Will of a painting. The death of Marat, by Jacques-Louis David. If it had been on purpose, Will would certainly have thought that was in character for the Ripper. To make something in likeness to a piece of art. That was something he was known to do, after all.

In the back of his mind, a faint bell rang, but Will ignored it.

Will looked up, and for the first time ever, allowed himself to meet Jack Crawford's eyes. What he saw there made his anger flare hotter.

Jack really had blinded himself. He thought Will was enough to make things go his way. He thought this had to be the Ripper, because Will had promised it. Because he wanted to catch the Ripper. It was the only thing that mattered.

In that moment, Will hated Jack. Hated his ingrained nobility and skewed morality. Hated that he was not conflicted about his job or the things he saw.

Jack's expression turned almost comically shocked, realizing Will had actually met his eyes. He was unable to say anything.

"I want this to be clear, Jack," Will said, holding the startled man's gaze, "I do not work miracles. This isn't the Ripper. I know you wanted it to be. So did I. But it's not. I'll tell you exactly what happened here, but you need to know right now that this is not the Ripper."

Jack's brow furrowed. He had recovered from the shock of Will meeting his gaze, and now he was angry too.

"But it matches the pattern," he insisted stubbornly.

Will shook his head.

"No, it doesn't," he said, "The person who took this man's kidneys didn't intend to kill him. He just wanted to sell the organs."

Will began to point out the evidence supporting his point, explaining every move that had ended with the man dying in the tub. Jack argued, still determined to be on the Ripper's trail.

"No," Zeller said, as if it were obvious, "It's definitely the Ripper. Just look at the staging. Taking the organs while he was alive? Classic Ripper."

Will steeled himself and met Zeller's eyes, leveling him with a stern look. It was a look he had learned as a teacher, and he knew it would be amplified through actual eye contact.

For a brief moment, Zeller's eyes changed, and were a cold grey like the man's. But then, they were back to normal, and Zeller was the first to look away.

"Geez, you're pretty creepy when you do that, Graham," he said, taking a step away, "You do it to everyone who disagrees with you?"

Will couldn't help but smile at the way he backed down. He felt powerful.

"Only when their disagreement threatens to let a killer go free," he said, then turned back to Jack, "This guy is young. Look at medical students or EMTs. I have a hunch he has access to an ambulance. Find him. Then, we can focus on the Ripper again."

Jack sighed, and Will allowed himself to hope he would actually get to go to Hannibal's tonight after all. For a moment.

"Alright. Come to the labs and help me get this sorted out. If this isn't the Ripper, I want to understand why."

Will bit his tongue against a sharp retort, just nodding. As he left the scene to head to the labs, he texted Hannibal.

-You were right. It wasn't him. Jack wants me at the labs, and it's gonna be a while. I'm drained. I could really use your help.-

He felt a bit bad for asking Hannibal to leave his house just to help, but he thought he might snap if he had to do this on his own. And despite himself, Will really, really wanted to see Hannibal.

Almost at once, there was a reply.

-I'll be there as soon as I can, Will. Remember you can tell Jack no. He is not your keeper.-

Will smiled.

No, that's ***your*** *job* , he thought.

-Thank you. I want to get this over with as soon as possible.-

Will didn't expect another immediate reply, expecting Hannibal was in a hurry to leave. But there it was, almost instantly.

-Anytime. See you soon.-

Will felt better, knowing Hannibal would be there to help. Hannibal could help translate what Will was saying so Jack could understand it. He hadn't tested this theory, but he supposed now was as good a time as ever.

He was exhausted, though. He knew what had done it, and it was almost ironic. He had drained his energy simply by meeting Jack and Zeller's eyes. By making eye contact with two people he normally wouldn't, he had used all his remaining energy for the day.

He would have to tell Hannibal about this. Hannibal would share in his triumph of finally being able to meet the eyes of his coworkers, and would share in the sorrow of the price.

Will had someone he could share both the good and the bad with. He hadn't really had someone like that, to this extent, since the basement. It was not entirely novel, but it was still warming to him. Lirette had done his best, for the time they had had together, but this was so much more.

Will didn't have the energy to talk to Hannibal about his feelings tonight. That would be an exhausting conversation on its own, and he wanted to be relatively fresh for it. He would have to put it off for at least a week, then. Unless Hannibal invited him to dinner again before then. Which, he might. Hannibal did genuinely enjoy feeding Will.

Will wondered if it was related to that time when Hannibal had been starving as a child, and unable to feed Mischa. If Hannibal felt compelled now to feed anyone he cared for.

Will wondered who else Hannibal cared for. Hannibal didn't exactly talk about anyone else, though they had discussed Alana of course. Hannibal knew Alana, and fed her. Maybe she was also someone he cared for. Will hadn't seen her since their dinner, so he couldn't really guess.

Maybe Hannibal would tell him, if Will asked. Will knew they had a strange, deep level of trust between them, and it was possible Hannibal would open up about this. Will could even ask. Hannibal asked about Will's past sometimes, and Will hadn't really ever asked him anything about his own in return. Will thought Hannibal would tell him if he asked.

But that was for later. Right now, Will had to prove to Jack that he was right. That would only require a bit more mental work, but a lot more physical evidence. Jack believed him, but they still had to prove it. And catch the real killer.

At the labs, Price was at work on the computers, and Beverly was nearby to offer her input. Will knew what they are doing. They were looking for anyone who they could match with his profile and an ambulance. He knew they'd find something soon. Maybe even soon enough to save the next victim.

And Will hoped for it. While he generally didn't feel much of anything for the victims of killers, Will could tell this young person wasn't trying to kill anyone. Medical school is expensive, and they were selling kidneys on the black market. That was an easy conclusion, and Will knew it was the truth. They would all see, when they found the kid.

Some time passed, Will wondering if Hannibal was close to getting there, and Beverly came over to where Will was standing. She stayed a respectful distance away, wary of sending him into a panic, though Will felt like he might want to see how close she could get before he would actually feel bad.

But not today. He'd already used up all his experimental energy for that kind of thing. Possibly more than he'd really had to use.

"You know, you're right," Beverly said.

Will turned and smiled tiredly to her.

"I imagine so," he said, "but I guess you're saying the evidence supports me. Again. It usually does."

Beverly laughed.

"You and I both know that's not how it works. The evidence doesn't have to work for you, you work from it. But yeah, it does. These cuts. They're clearly done by someone who has been practicing, but not good at it yet. It's not the Ripper. We all know the Ripper has been doing it for years, and has a way better hand than this."

Will made a soft sound of consideration, pleased. Beverly seemed to want to be on his side, want to be his friend. He could use another friend. Maybe she could be someone, in addition to Hannibal, who he could talk to. He had an idea it would be slower going, getting that close to her. Just by virtue of his own issues.

"He certainly does," Will thought aloud, "The Ripper doesn't do anything without purpose, elegance, intention. Grace. This was just… graceless."

Beverly studied Will for a moment, not disgusted or concerned by his morbid and somewhat grotesque comments. She just seemed interested, and willing to listen.

That was something Will needed more than he would admit.

Chapter End Notes

Progress with eye contact! And expanding his social circle a bit. I'm so proud of Will.

Up next: Some background on Will's experiences with Chilton, and Hannibal comes to the rescue.

42

Chapter Summary

> Will's first meeting with Chilton, and Hannibal's not-so-subtle flirting at the lab? More likely than you think.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

> “Will Graham, a pleasure to meet you at last. I was told you might come to see me some time ago. I admit I’ve been waiting for you to finally show up.”
>
> Will attempted a smile, trying not to let it look too much like the grimace he was having to hold back. Just the thought that people were talking about him made him uncomfortable. He had an idea what people would say about him, had been saying for seven years. It wasn’t what he would want them to say or think. But he didn’t have a say in it.
>
> “Thank you for, uh, letting me come, I guess,” Will said, unsure what the expected response was to that, “I just, I thought I’d give this whole therapy thing another go.”
>
> Doctor Fredrick Chilton grinned. He wasn’t much older than Will, but enough that he had already tried medical school and decided on psychiatry instead. He had agreed to see Will for cheap, and Will was starting to get the feeling it was because of those things people were saying about him.
>
> “It’s no trouble at all. Please come in and sit down. Is it alright if I shut the door?”
>
> Chilton gave Will enough space for him to enter the office without making him panic, and asking about the door gave Will an idea he might actually be aware of Will’s needs and work with him on them rather than try to bust through them the way others did.
>
> The office wasn’t very large, but it didn’t feel dark or claustrophobic, so Will nodded.
>
> “Sure.”
>
> Chilton shut the door and walked over to sit in a chair that was in front of the couch he had offered Will. He was close enough it made Will feel tense and uncomfortable, but not quite on the verge of panic. He scraped his thumb nail under his lip and tried to focus on his breathing to keep himself under control.
>
> “Tell me what’s troubling you today,” Chilton said, taking a notepad from the table by his chair and preparing to write.

Will didn't like that very much. He didn't like the idea that everything he said would be written down. The potential for someone else to get their hands on the notes terrified him.

"I guess just everything," Will said, "I mean, I haven't been really alright since I was fourteen. I was abducted. Right out of my bed."

Chilton nodded, as if he had already known that, and wrote something down. Will wondered if Chilton had read up on him before he had come today. He hoped not. He knew what kinds of ideas people got when they read about what had happened.

"Tell me about it," Chilton said, looking up at Will.

Will could tell Chilton wanted him to meet his eyes. That wasn't going to happen. At least not today. Will would have to start getting better before that would even be an option for him.

"He had been watching me. Before he did it. He had done it before, with other kids. He had gotten good at it, and he knew what he was doing. He knew I was alone in the house."

Chilton scratched out another note, then leaned forward. Will reactively flinched away, remembering how Miles Henry had done that exact thing before demanding Will look him in the eye.

"He had killed the others," Chilton said, and Will could hear the obsessive fascination in his voice, "The ones before you. He killed them after only a month or two. Why didn't he kill you, Will?"

Will scraped harder at his lip, wishing he hadn't come. But he pushed on, trusting that this was just what therapy was supposed to be like. It was an acquired taste, and he just hadn't acquired it yet.

"I knew what he wanted," Will said, wishing he was talking to Lirette instead of this stranger, "I could see things, and he liked that. He probably thought he wouldn't be able to find another one like me once I was dead. That's why he kept me so long."

Will's daddy hadn't known that part of it. Will had kept most of the details from him, and only Lirette had heard about what happened in the basement.

"What kind of things could you see?" Chilton asked, writing on his notepad. The sound of the pen on paper was irritating in the otherwise quiet room.

Will rubbed his hand over his arm, aware of the typical self-soothing action it was as well as unable to be indifferent to the calming effect it had. It was small things like that which he resented the most, his typical reactions to his atypical situation. The world shouldn't keep going after so many bad things. But it did, and everyone was just forced to pretend they were fine. Those who couldn't pretend needed to find a way to be fine again. No matter the cost.

"I can always see things people try to hide," Will answered, "In their body language and tone changes. My brain makes connections faster than I can follow. I know things without really knowing how."

Chilton was feverishly writing, and Will felt a sinking in his stomach. He was beginning to understand that this psychiatrist had agreed to see him so cheap because he wanted to study him, not help him. Chilton saw Will as a case study he could publish a paper on and get his name floated in the prestigious circles of his peers.

Will just hoped he saw the potential in being able to say he had cured Will of his anxiety. If Chilton could claim to have cured Will's fear, it would earn him a place on psychiatric panels aplenty. Will had to hope he saw that. Even if he didn't cure it, but just helped enough. Will wouldn't even mind if he lied and told people he had cured it, so long as he helped.

"And what are the things Steven Walters' body language and tone told you, when you were in his basement?" Chilton asked.

Will frowned, unable to stop the images from flooding his mind. The dark of the basement. The bringer of light with his cold and steely gaze. The chain when Will was bad. The rag that always stank of rotting fruit and made everything so much easier.

Will's breathing began to come short and labored, his chest locking up as he tried desperately to pull away from the memories. He could feel the hands on his skin, and smell the sweet odor of his damnation.

He wasn't safe here.

Will stood and stumbled to the door, needing to get out. To get away.

Doctor Chilton was calling out to him, but Will had gotten out and he was running. He couldn't breathe, and his vision was starting to fade, but he had to get away.

—

"Will," Hannibal said, that usual warmth in his voice that made Will smile even despite his exhaustion, "Are you alright?"

Will huffed a laugh and shrugged.

"I'm tired," he admitted, "But I do have something to tell you. Later. Just help me get through this so we can both leave."

Hannibal grinned.

"Are you implying we can leave together?" he asked.

Will felt his face heat. He was pretty sure Hannibal was flirting with him, but he hadn't been prepared for it. More than that, he was petrified of responding in a way that would require something to change. He didn't want anything to change, even though he did. He wanted it desperately. But he was afraid.

Will stammered something, sounding like a fool, but Jack rescued him from saying anything comprehensible.

“Doctor Lecter, I’m glad you’re here. What do you make of this?”

Hannibal’s warm and piercing gaze left Will, giving him a moment to collect himself.

“I have not yet been entirely filled in, but I’m sure that I will agree with whatever Will has said. I have yet to find a case where I do not.”

Jack huffed and began showing Hannibal pictures, explaining why they had thought it was the Ripper, and how Will had claimed it wasn’t. Hannibal listened with his usual polite interest, though Will thought he seemed just a touch distracted.

Will was distracted, too. Hannibal hadn’t ever been that blatant in his show of affection or attraction, and Will didn’t know how to deal with it. He was trying to come to terms with the fact that they were probably in love with each other, but that it just wouldn’t work between them. If they tried, it would ruin the good relationship they had. He just couldn’t do it.

But Hannibal seemed to have other plans. Will didn’t know how to deal with that.

“I agree with Will,” Hannibal said, surveying the photographs of the scene, “while these cuts were made by a hand with training, they have not yet gained a mastery of it. We know from past scenes that the Ripper is certainly no novice. I’m quite impressed by Will’s observation, as it is not easily noticed. I may not have done so, had I not been looking for it.”

Will huffed and shook his head. Hannibal was laying it on thick, and he needed to stop it.

“I’m always looking for it,” he said, “and I’ve been pouring over the Ripper files for weeks now. I ought to know his work when I see it.”

Hannibal smiled as Will stepped up to the table where the body was finally laying. Jack huffed his annoyance at Will’s insistence that he was right, but didn’t say anything. Probably because he believed it.

“Certainly,” Hannibal said, “you believe this killer was attempting to save the life of the victim, by performing open cardiac massage, yes?”

Will nodded.

“But he had lost too much blood, and it didn’t work. His body was in shock from the surgery already, poorly performed, and he didn’t survive.”

Hannibal nodded, agreeing with Will’s assessment of what had happened.

“That matches the evidence,” Hannibal said, “This does not appear to be any sort of display, but rather a scene of nearly comic failure. The Ripper did not do this.”

Jack turned sharply, facing the pair at the computer.

“Tell me you have something!” he demanded.

Price’s head popped up, and he was smiling.

“We do!” he called back brightly.

Beverly stood with him, looking amused and impressed. Will thought they had probably found a promising lead.

Chapter End Notes

We draw ever closer to the moment when they actually get their stuff together. But how close I shall not tell.

Up next: Hannibal extends an invitation Will can't refuse, and they talk about progress

43

Chapter Summary

Will is really tired, but he gets to eat with Hannibal. They're both glad he's making progress.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will's part of the investigation was over. At least for the time being. Hannibal had helped Jack understand that Will was really sure about what he saw. It hadn't taken very long once Will had backup.

Hannibal was walking with him out to the car again. This time, Will thought they really would end up at Hannibal's house, though not for the reason both of them really wanted.

"Do you intend to refuse my dinner invitation again?" Hannibal asked, "I don't believe I have committed any egregious sin today."

Will huffed a laugh.

"No, you haven't. It's pretty late, though. You sure you want company this time of night?"

Hannibal smiled brightly, as if he couldn't think of anything better. Will worried about it.

"Certainly," Hannibal said, "forgive me if this is rude, but I have a feeling you have not eaten properly today."

Will raised an eyebrow.

"A feeling?" he asked, "You sure you can't just hear my stomach growling or something?"

Honestly, he felt like there had to be some reason Hannibal would guess that. It wasn't like Hannibal to just assume things, and this was an odd thing for him to know.

Hannibal had the decency to appear sheepish, and he leaned towards Will slightly. Will worried for a moment that he meant to kiss him, but then Hannibal inhaled through his nose.

"I can smell it," Hannibal confessed, "You have the scent of coffee, and the very faint scent of toast. I imagine that was your breakfast, and you have been surviving off coffee the rest of the day."

Will felt his mouth go dry, inexplicably finding this an attractive quality. Maybe it was just because it was Hannibal, but Will couldn't be sure. It was not a normal thing to find attractive, learning someone could smell everything you had eaten that day. But Will did.

"Well," Will said, then coughed, "you might be right about that. I didn't realize you had such an acute sense of smell, Doctor Lecter."

Hannibal shrugged nonchalantly, turning and leaning against his car to face Will now they had reached the vehicles.

"Would you come to dinner?" Hannibal asked.

Will sighed.

"Yeah, okay," he said, "it's either that or I have to cook for myself, so the choice is pretty obvious. What are you making?"

Hannibal laughed softly.

"Never ask. It ruins the surprise."

—

One of the reasons Will had said yes to Hannibal's dinner invitation was that he was hungry. He hadn't been lying about that. But he also really wanted to have some time to be around Hannibal since their usual dinner time had been messed with. Will would have come over even if Hannibal hadn't offered to feed him, but just wanted him to be there.

Will didn't have the energy to talk about all the things he had been hoping to discuss, but he thought Hannibal would be pleased to hear about his progress with eye contact.

Hannibal answered the door with a smile, having already discarded his jacket and donned an apron. Will smiled in return, but he knew his exhaustion was visible.

"You said you have something to tell me," Hannibal said, gently, "Shall I wait until a time when you are not so tired?"

Will smiled and shook his head.

"No, I think you'll be pleased, and I don't want you to hear it from Jack first."

Hannibal raised an eyebrow.

"Then by all means," he said, "Tell me."

Will wished he had more energy, to be excited about this.

"You remember that, when we were working on the Angelmaker case, you told me to take hold of my anger, allow it to give me power?"

Hannibal nodded, watching Will curiously. He had stopped cooking for a moment, entirely engrossed in what Will was saying.

“Well, I did that tonight,” Will said, “When I showed up at the scene, I was so angry. I was angry at the killer, and with Jack. I was angry I was there, and I just *used* it. I looked Jack right in the eye and told him he was wrong, and I don’t work miracles.”

Hannibal grinned.

“I wish I had been there to see it,” he said, “I am certain you were glorious.”

Will flushed, and he felt a bit of his energy return. He realized he was slipping into Hannibal’s mind a bit, feeling the things Hannibal felt. He didn’t have the energy to stop himself from doing it.

But it was alright, because Hannibal was feeling what Will wanted to feel.

“And that wasn’t all,” Will said, “Zeller tried to argue with me, and I just wanted to see how he would react. I caught him in a stare down and he got real uncomfortable. He called me creepy, and stopped bothering me.”

Hannibal laughed, and it was a delighted sound. Will felt Hannibal’s joy and pleasure wash over him, and he was glad.

“You do not sound as if you are offended for being called creepy,” Hannibal said.

Will shrugged.

“It’s better than some things I’ve been called,” he said, “And I bet it was pretty unnerving for him. First time I’ve ever met his eyes, and it’s when I’m madder than a wet hen. I probably looked like I was fixin’ to add a body to the scene.”

Hannibal grinned.

“I can’t tell you how pleased I am, Will,” he said, “And I understand why you are so fatigued. For you, eye contact must be quite energy expensive.”

Will nodded.

That was true for anyone but Hannibal. He could meet Hannibal’s eyes even now, when he felt like he might fall asleep at the drop of a hat. Hannibal wasn’t energy expensive for Will at all.

“I’m pretty beat,” Will agreed, “But I’m glad I got to tell you. It was… a thrilling feeling. Powerful. To finally be able to meet their eyes without being afraid. When I looked at Zeller, I briefly thought of the man from the basement, but I was able to push it away. I actually got past it.”

Hannibal hummed, pleased.

“I would offer to make a special dessert to celebrate, but it is already quite late, and I expect you will want to get home sooner rather than later.”

Will nodded, once again grateful for Hannibal’s consideration.

“I don’t know if it’s exactly worth a celebration like that, anyway,” Will said, “It’s a step forward, but only a small one. And we don’t know if I’ll end up taking a step back yet. Might be best to wait for a bigger milestone.”

Hannibal nodded along thoughtfully.

Chapter End Notes

No conversation about feelings just yet. Will's too tired. But he gets a treat in the next couple of chapters. ;)

Up next: I give in to the popular trope. Will stays the night because it's not safe for him to drive home.

44

Chapter Summary

Will is a lot more tired than he realized, and Hannibal wants to keep him safe.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will didn't know what he was going to do. He was so tired he knew he wouldn't be able to drive home, but he couldn't ask Hannibal to let him stay the night. After realizing that Hannibal felt the same way as he did, and the way Hannibal had spoken to him at the labs, he thought it would be a very bad idea. It would give Hannibal the wrong impression.

He didn't have the energy to go to a motel either. That would require talking to someone. He would have to pull off the road and sleep in his car for a while. It was really the only thing he could think of to do.

"Are you alright to drive, Will?" Hannibal asked.

Will snapped his head up, realizing he had started to doze off at the table. He sighed and rubbed a hand over his face.

Damn, he was tired.

"I'll have to be," he said, "sorry for being such poor company. I did warn you I was tired."

Hannibal shook his head, frowning with concern.

"I am the one to blame. I should have encouraged you to go home and rest, but I selfishly asked you to dine with me instead. I have a spare room you may use if that does not make you too uncomfortable. I fear it is not safe for you to drive in this condition."

Will blinked slowly, having a hard time putting his thoughts together.

A spare room. That would be alright, maybe. And Hannibal had offered. Maybe he had seen that Will wasn't in the right place mentally to respond to his flirting, so it would be fine.

Hannibal was safe.

"I don't want to cause you any trouble," Will said.

Hannibal smiled, and his relief was palpable. He had been really worried about Will.

“Not at all,” Hannibal said, standing and gathering their dishes, “I would never forgive myself if I let you leave and something were to happen. Just give me a moment to prepare.”

Will nodded sleepily, musing over the situation. He never allowed himself to be in a vulnerable position like this in someone else’s company. He was too aware of potential threats. But Hannibal was safe, and Will trusted him. Hannibal left the kitchen and Will heard his feet on the stairs.

He wasn’t often left alone in Hannibal’s house. He wasn’t unhappy with that. He liked Hannibal’s company, and despite being comfortable in the house, he didn’t necessarily want to be left alone there.

He supposed he would be alone tonight, but he expected to be asleep, and therefore not be bothered by it.

“Will.”

There was a gentle hand on his shoulder, and Will snapped back awake. He hadn’t meant to fall back asleep, but it just showed that it really would have been a bad idea for him to drive.

“Sorry,” Will mumbled, shaking his head, “I guess I’m a lot more tired than I thought.”

Hannibal hummed in agreement.

“Then I am more satisfied with our decision for you to stay. Come, Will, the room is ready for you.”

Will stood, almost falling back into his seat with how exhausted he was. Hannibal was there to catch him and hold him upright, a hand on his arm and the other finding a place low on Will’s back.

“I have taken the liberty of setting out some sleepwear you are welcome to use,” Hannibal said, leading him toward a set of stairs, “If there is anything else you require, all you need do is ask.”

At the base of the stairs, Will stumbled again, ending up with his cheek pressed into Hannibal’s chest. At some point, Hannibal had changed his own clothes, and he was now wearing a pair of flannel pajama pants and a very soft red sweater. It felt nice against Will’s face, and he wanted to stay there all night. He thought his sleep would be protected from nightmares entirely if he could just stay there.

Hannibal huffed softly and pulled Will upright. Will mumbled something along the lines of an apology, though he doubted it was comprehensible. Hannibal didn’t seem to mind, continuing to lead him.

The stairs were difficult, Will’s legs feeling as if they weighed far too much for him to even lift his feet off the ground. Hannibal helped him, and eventually Will was sitting on the edge of a very soft bed in a room he had never seen before.

Hannibal knelt in front of Will, a position he had taken before yet still made Will's mind reel. It just didn't seem right.

"I must leave you now, Will," Hannibal said softly, smiling and brushing a curl out of Will's face, "I am only in the next room if you need anything during the night."

Will nodded, and Hannibal stood. He closed the door on his way out.

When Hannibal was gone, Will looked around himself. The colors in the room were light, surprising when one considered the rest of Hannibal's home. The sheets were a light powder blue that Will found comforting, and the curtains were white. The blanket on the bed was a blue and white and brown argyle pattern that somehow managed not to look as ugly as Will would have expected if someone had described it to him.

Thoughts tried to form and solidify in Will's head, but he didn't have the energy or focus to examine them. He put everything he could manage into standing and changing into the pajamas Hannibal had left for him.

They were unbelievably soft, and Will ran his hands over the fabric for a moment after he had pulled them on.

Will left his clothes in a pile on the floor, vaguely aware that would be unacceptable to Hannibal, but unable to do anything else with them. He turned off the light and stumbled back to the bed in the dark. He was asleep the moment he was under the covers.

—

"Oh, little bird, you think he could love you?"

Will felt his blood freeze in his veins, and he pressed his fingernails into the palms of his hands. He knew where that voice was coming from, but he refused to look. He was stronger now, and he would not fall back to those habits.

"This is a dream," Will said, forcing his voice to come strong and confident despite the way his chest was threatening to collapse in and crush his lungs, "you are dead."

"Oh dear, little bird, do you believe that?" the voice lilted, mocking and cruel, "how can you kill me when I made a home for myself in your mind? In order to kill me, you would have to kill yourself."

Will grit his teeth and shook his head.

He wouldn't let the man get his way. Not again. Not anymore. Will had survived him, had overcome him. Will had beat him.

"I just have to excise you, like a tumor," Will snapped, "you're a disease, and I can heal. I'm stronger than you."

The man laughed, and the sound echoed off the walls of the dark basement, sounding as if he was all around Will.

“You may have shown your physical strength when you tore my eyes from my face, but it’s clear your mind is weak. I’ve been allowed to live here comfortably for all these years. You’ll never be rid of me. I’m what makes you special. I’m what makes him interested in you in the first place.”

“Shut up,” Will said, forcing himself not to shout, because panicking wasn’t the right choice, “You don’t know anything about him. You don’t deserve to talk about him.”

“And you don’t deserve to know him, little bird. You can’t even bring yourself to touch him. You let him touch all he wants, but you never reach back. Why would he want anything to do with you?”

Will shut his eyes and grit his teeth. He felt his heart beating hard in his chest, a trapped bird breaking its wings on the bars of the cage. He could smell rotten fruit, and he knew he wouldn’t be able to breathe soon.

“Look at me.”

Will’s eyes flew open, and all he saw was a pair of cold, grey eyes. He was caught again, trapped. He couldn’t escape the man, and he never would.

Chapter End Notes

Could Hannibal have driven Will home? Probably. Did he absolutely take advantage of the fact Will wouldn't think of that himself? Absolutely.

Up Next: Hannibal helps Will deal with the aftermath of his nightmare.

45

Chapter Summary

Will wakes up from his nightmare, and Hannibal is there to help.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will shot up, a hand on his chest over his pounding heart, unable to breathe.

The room around him was strange, and there was no dog jumping onto the bed to comfort him. He couldn't breathe.

Will rolled out of the bed, falling to the ground on his knees. He couldn't breathe, and he didn't know where he was. He felt the panic in his throat and chest, in his ears and the space behind his eyes.

Will made his way to the door through his panic and managed to yank it open. He was still on the floor, and the darkness of the hallway outside the room did nothing to calm his frightened mind and body. He couldn't breathe.

All at once, Will felt himself being pulled back against something warm and solid, limbs wrapping around him and holding him tight.

It was as if he had been falling apart, and that embrace had pulled his pieces back together. Making him whole again.

"Imagine your lungs have been taken from you, Will."

The voice in his ear was warm and familiar, and the words triggered the right cascade of thoughts, unlocking his chest and allowing him to pull in a frantic breath. He gasped and pulled in panicked breaths until his thoughts began to fall back into order and he realized where he was.

He was in Hannibal's house. Hannibal was holding him.

"I'm sorry," Will said, realizing belatedly that his face was covered in tears and his voice was hoarse.

Hannibal shushed him.

"It is not anything you could have changed, Will," Hannibal whispered, sounding a bit tired himself, "I had hoped it would not happen, though I should have known better. You are

alright. I know this is strange to you."

Will felt his heart begin to calm in his chest, under Hannibal's large hand.

Hannibal had done this before, applied deep pressure therapy when he knew Will was in the grips of an attack. It had been when Will had been so foolish as to lie, thinking Hannibal wouldn't know. Usually it was Winston who offered this service when Will woke from a nightmare, but Winston was miles away. In Will's house.

Will held onto Hannibal like a lifeline, feeling a sob build up in his chest. He missed the dogs very suddenly, wishing he had gone home hours before so he could be with them. He might have been in love with Hannibal, but the dogs had been his loyal companions for years and he couldn't stop needing them just because Hannibal was there.

"Do your dogs serve as your comfort when you are at home?" Hannibal asked softly, his voice a lull in Will's ear. As if he knew very well how Will was feeling, and what he was missing in that moment.

Will nodded, unsure if he would be able to speak without wailing like a child.

"I thought as much," Hannibal said, using his voice to calm and keep Will present, "Many who deal with anxiety find dogs a beneficial companion. I do not know if it was recommended to you by one of the psychiatric professionals you met before me, or you discovered it on your own, but it was a very good idea. And you take very good care of them. They are better off for being able to help you."

Will smiled through his tears, beginning to feel better. Hannibal was helping more than Will ever would have thought he could.

"Lirette thought of it," Will said, his voice a bit rough and choked, "the year after I escaped, I got my first dog. We trained it to do the deep pressure stuff, and I've tried to keep dogs ever since."

When Hannibal replied, Will could hear that he was smiling.

"Another thing I can thank him for if we ever meet," He said.

Will thought of it, Hannibal meeting Lirette. The two most important people in Will's life. The thought was cast in a warm honeyed glow, and Will decided he would try to make that happen, if only to make Lirette happy and to see him smile in person again. It had been a while.

"He would love to meet you," Will laughed, wiping tears from his face.

Hannibal hummed curiously, the vibrations strange and pleasant against Will's spine.

"Have you told him about me?" he asked.

Will felt his face heat as he realized that he had told Lirette a lot about Hannibal. It was one of the only topics he had talked about recently, because he was always thinking about

Hannibal.

“Of course,” Will said, “I was excited to tell him why I’ve been getting so much better.”

Hannibal hummed again, taking in a deep breath. Will almost didn’t believe what was happening.

“God, did you just smell me?” Will asked, remembering what Hannibal had said about being able to smell what he had eaten.

He wondered what other things Hannibal might be able to smell. That was not a safe line of thought, especially for the position he was in at the moment.

“I apologize,” Hannibal said softly, “I was curious.”

Will furrowed his brow.

“Curious about what?”

Hannibal hesitated for only a moment before answering.

“You usually wear the most atrocious aftershave. It has almost worn off completely, and I wanted to sample your natural scent.”

Will knew he was blushing down to his toes now. That was not a normal thing to do, much less admit to. He knew Hannibal appreciated his honesty, and so he could expect the same in return, but he hadn’t been expecting something like this.

“I keep getting it for Christmas,” Will said, thinking of how it always arrived in the mail with a New York address on the return label.

She had never left a card or note, but Will knew it was from Macy. She sent it more out of obligation to “keep in touch” than any real affection for him. They had never been close. He was amused that Hannibal disagreed with her taste. He only used it because he didn’t like shopping for it.

“It smells like something with a ship on the bottle, left too long on the shelf,” Hannibal said, and Will shook his head.

“Yeah? And how does my “natural scent” compare?” he asked.

That was a mistake, because Hannibal leaned in close to Will’s neck and took another deep breath in. Will was suddenly very aware of every place where they were touching. Hannibal was still wearing the sweater, or he had put it back on to come help Will. It wasn’t exactly an item of sleepwear. The thought occurred to Will that Hannibal might have been sleeping without a shirt on, and he felt as if some circuit in his brain fried at the image it tried to conjure.

“You are very earthy and fresh,” Hannibal whispered, his face still very close to Will’s skin, “it is reminiscent of a forest after light rainfall. It is a pleasant and calming scent.”

Will couldn't handle it. This was all too much. He began to pull away, and Hannibal let him.

"We should probably both go back to bed," he said, turning to help Hannibal stand up, since they had been tangled together on the floor. The image was another one that made it hard to think properly. "We'll be dead men walking tomorrow if we don't."

Hannibal accepted the hand Will offered and they stood together in the hall for another moment, their hands clasped together. Will pulled away quickly, stepping into the doorway of the guest room he had been using.

"Will you be alright, Will?" Hannibal asked, concern deeply etched in his tone and expression.

Will smiled wryly.

"Probably not," he said, "but I think I can get a couple hours of sleep still. Goodnight, Hannibal."

Hannibal nodded.

"Sweet dreams, Will."

Will shut the door behind him, standing there until he heard the door to Hannibal's room shut as well. He let out a long breath, shaking his head at himself.

It was hard enough just to spend time around Hannibal, now that Will had realized they felt the same way about each other. It felt like walking on eggshells, but he just couldn't stay away. This had been so much different. Hannibal had been there, holding Will and helping him, describing how he smelled.

And for whatever reason, that hadn't entirely weirded Will out. He was still as in love and obsessed as he had been before. As addicted.

Will doubted he would be able to sleep, no matter how exhausted he was and should be after everything. He usually struggled to sleep, and now he was too mentally occupied to even consider sleeping. That being as it was, he lay back down in the bed, intending to lay there awake until morning when he would leave.

He did lay down, staring up at the darkened ceiling, lit only by the gentle light of the stars outside. He couldn't stop himself from thinking, and all he could think about was Hannibal. Hannibal's warm breath against the skin of his neck, the soft feeling of the sweater he had been wearing, and the soft rumble of Hannibal's voice in Will's ear and against his spine.

It might have been too much because Will couldn't bring himself to act on the feelings he knew they both had. He had been overwhelmed because he knew he was so close to ruining everything. Because he couldn't be what Hannibal deserved.

But it had been nice, to feel Hannibal's warmth and solidity. To believe he could be the one thing in Will's life he would be allowed to keep.

One nice thing he could have.

Will fell asleep.

Chapter End Notes

Cuddles! So much cuddles. And some weirdo Hannibal, smelling Will up. As you do.

Up next: Hannibal makes Will breakfast again. They have a nice morning.

Chapter 46

Chapter Summary

A nice, calm breakfast for our boys. Much fluff.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will woke to the smell of something sweet and delicious. He jerked up in the bed, not sure how he had possibly managed to fall asleep after what had happened. It occurred to him that it could have been a dream, or at least an extension of a dream. That would be strange, but he was sure it wasn't entirely unlikely.

Will got out of bed, straightening it up as much as he could after his restless tossing had messed it up. He changed back into the clothes he had been wearing the day before and folded the pyjamas Hannibal had lent him, setting them out on the bed. He wasn't sure if that was what he was supposed to do in this situation, but he could imagine Hannibal laughing at him if he showed up downstairs with the pajamas bundled up in his arms.

Not that Hannibal ever would. It was just what his mind conjured to stop him from taking the chance.

Will made his way down the stairs, following his nose more than his memory, because he didn't really remember the way they had come last night to get to the spare room. He had been nearly unconscious as Hannibal led him.

Will would not make that mistake again.

Will ended up in the kitchen, and he was stopped in his tracks by the sight in front of him.

Hannibal was at the stove, his back to Will in the doorway, wearing that same sweater from the night before and the pyjama pants. He was barefoot, and his hair was slightly ruffled as if he had only passed a hand through it after waking up, and hadn't put any product in yet. Everything about it combined into something entirely jarring to Will, making him reel with the shock of it.

It was so domestic.

Hannibal turned, catching sight of Will and smiling. He looked tired, but genuinely pleased to see Will.

"I hope I didn't wake you," Hannibal said, and his voice was slightly rough from sleep. It made something writhe in Will's stomach, and he tried not to think about it. "I wanted to

have some breakfast ready for you."

Will huffed and shook his head.

Hannibal was too good to be true. It didn't make sense that he would want anything to do with someone as broken as Will.

"You didn't wake me," Will said, "Actually, I should apologize again for waking you up in the middle of the night. I'm an awful guest."

Hannibal blinked once, then shook his head in return.

"I am the one who did not consider that your dogs were not available to you. I could have offered to drive you home last night, but I selfishly thought only that I would like to make breakfast for you again."

Will felt his face heat with a blush. It was too early for this kind of conversation.

"Well, I'm all too happy to accept another meal from you," he said honestly, "and I really can't thank you enough for what you've done for me. I feel like a burden."

Hannibal smiled, still tired, and set a platter of cut fruit on the island, clearly intending to entice Will further into the room. It worked, and Will stepped up to take a strawberry from the plate.

"Friends are never burdens," Hannibal said, "If you ever require something I cannot provide, I will tell you. But I do enjoy being able to provide for you."

Will nodded. He knew that. It was clear in every action Hannibal took, he was protective and attached in a way no one else ever had been to Will. He genuinely enjoyed Will's company, and he did whatever he could to make Will happy, healthy, and safe.

He was too perfect.

"Well, thanks," Will said, "At risk of sounding rude, you're clearly still tired."

Hannibal huffed a soft laugh, returning to the stove.

"Yes," he said.

"Then, why did you get up? You could have stayed in bed longer. You don't have any patients today. It's Sunday."

Hannibal turned and smiled, beginning to look less like he wished to go back to sleep. He was waking up.

"I feared you would leave before I awoke," Hannibal admitted, "because you clearly feel uncomfortable about how the night went, and if you woke before me you might find it an opportune chance to escape whatever you feared the results of it may have been. Additionally, though you said your accomplishment yesterday was not worth celebrating, I

wanted to celebrate regardless. Thus, I have made another breakfast for you. Better than the first meal we shared."

Hannibal's eyes were sparkling with pleasure as he turned, showing Will what he had been working on at the stove. It looked like a pastry, smelled autumnal, and made Will's mouth water. He couldn't identify it on sight, but Hannibal was quick to introduce it to him.

"I've made a cinnamon apple babka," Hannibal said, "there are also Guava Quesitos in the oven, and they should be done momentarily. I am unsure what your preferences are regarding pastries, or if you even enjoy them, but I worked with the hope that you would like them."

Will ran a hand over his face, unable to keep from smiling like a fool. Hannibal had been worried he would make something Will didn't like, but he had done it anyway in the hope that Will would be pleased.

God, Will was so in love. It was too much.

"They smell delicious," he said, "And I've said it before, I doubt I would dislike anything you make."

Hannibal's smile was brighter, now, as if Will's words had helped to wake him up and please him. Will guessed that was about right, and he felt pleased with himself for being able to make Hannibal happy. It was one thing he could do, he supposed.

"What are your plans for the day, Will?" Hannibal asked, "You know my schedule, but I have yet to hear you say what you will be doing on this lovely Sunday."

Will huffed a laugh.

"Well, I should probably go home and take care of the dogs. I was thinking of spending all day at home with them, maybe I'll go fishing. Even if they get a name for this killer, I'm not part of all that. The only thing I can think of that would make Jack call me would be a scene he thinks is the Ripper again."

Hannibal nodded.

"I hope you are left to your own devices for the day, then," he said, "It sounds like a very good and relaxing day, which you have earned."

Will shrugged.

A part of him wondered if Hannibal had been hoping they would be able to spend the whole day together. He had not shown a sign of disappointment when Will had told him his plans, so he thought it was more likely Hannibal had just been genuinely curious. That was good, relieving him of any guilt for not responding the way Hannibal had wanted.

It wouldn't be unpleasant to spend more time with Hannibal, of course, but Will felt like he needed some time to himself to put all his thoughts in order. To plan what he was going to do, and when.

“You have plans for today?” Will asked, curious only because it was Hannibal, and it felt like he should reciprocate his curiosity, even if it had no bearing on his own plans for the day.

Hannibal’s smile made Will think he was aware of that, but pleased by it.

“I think my day will be spent in much the same fashion,” Hannibal said, “I will be taking time for myself. I am planning a dinner party, so I may do some work on that.”

Will nodded. All things considered, it wasn’t surprising that Hannibal held dinner parties. It would almost be a waste for his cooking to be kept only to himself and the odd lucky friend like Will or Alana. It was more surprising that Will hadn’t heard him talk about them before, though he thought he knew the reason for it. It was the same reason Hannibal didn’t seem about to invite Will to the dinner party he was currently planning.

Because Hannibal knew Will wouldn’t want to go to it. Too many strange people who would expect him to shake hands and make eye contact. No escape if he became overwhelmed. Everything about it would be bad for Will, other than Hannibal. Hannibal knew that.

Even though they were both aware of it, Will felt a pang of jealousy, wondering if Alana would be invited to this one. He wished he was the right kind of person to go to a party like that. He wished he could be there, with Hannibal, letting everyone know how much Hannibal valued him.

“I think we both deserve some time to rest,” Will said, trying to ignore the ache of want in his chest, “Hopefully we’re both allowed to have it.”

Hannibal agreed, and took the Quesitos from the oven.

It was all delicious, and Will was happy. He was satisfied knowing that none of Hannibal’s dinner guests were there with them, or would have this experience. This morning was meant for Will alone, and Hannibal had made this breakfast just to please him.

Chapter End Notes

Our boys deserve some quiet off time, don't you think?

Up next: Another session with Chilton, and a phone call with Lirette.

47

Chapter Summary

> Will tries the therapy thing after the christmas debacle. Lirette hypes him up about Hannibal.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I’m sorry about how our last session went, Will,” Chilton said, though he didn’t sound all that sorry. It was an empty sentiment Will was unfortunately growing used to from the man. “I didn’t expect to see you again after you left. Why did you come back?”

Will drummed his fingers on his leg, trying not to panic. He had come to see Chilton a few times, but every time ended poorly. At their last session, Will had ended up having another panic attack, and he had fully intended it to be the last time.

“My friend told me I should try again,” he said, his throat raw from crying, “Especially after what happened over Christmas.”

Will was exhausted from crying. He had been on the phone with Lirette for hours nearly every day since it had happened, and he still couldn’t stop himself from sobbing when they talked about it. He could feel a sob building up in his throat now, as Chilton considered him. It was trapped in his rib cage just like his heart and lungs.

“What friend is that?” Chilton asked, “I agree with them entirely.”

Will nodded, biting down on his lip to keep himself in control.

“The police officer who saved me,” he said, unable to give more detail without throwing himself into a panic.

Chilton nodded, and maybe he saw he shouldn’t follow that line of questioning just then. More likely, he was just more interested in other avenues.

“Tell me what happened over Christmas,” he said.

Will huffed, trying to laugh, but it caught and was much more like the sob he had been suppressing.

“My dad died,” he said, the words spilling out between his teeth like a leak in a dam.

Tears spilled from his eyes, apparently feeling they had been given permission to do so by his admission. His vision blurred, but that was a mercy as he wouldn't have to see Chilton or his stupid office.

"Tell me what happened," Chilton said.

He sounded sympathetic, maybe even kind. Despite Will's initial misgivings, it might still work for him to talk to Chilton. Just a few times, maybe.

Will told him all of it. How he had gone home for the holidays, how his daddy had stopped drinking, how he hadn't known. How he had gone to wake up his daddy on Christmas eve, only to find he wouldn't wake up ever again.

Will was crying, but he was proud of how coherent he sounded. He wasn't blubbering or wailing. Even remembering the moment when he had completely lost his mind as the ambulance showed up, he managed not to panic in Doctor Chilton's office.

"So it's all my fault," Will finished, wiping his eyes on his sleeve, "If I could have just gotten over it, he would still be alive, and everything would be fine."

Chilton was writing on the notepad again, and Will felt suddenly ashamed for his behavior. It felt almost as if his emotional outburst was against the rules, and he was being a burden to Chilton as well as everyone else.

This had been a mistake.

"You're a smart kid, Will," Chilton said, filling Will with dread, "You're logical. So does it make logical sense to blame yourself?"

Will's heart dropped. He'd heard that before. Didn't Chilton understand that it didn't matter? His fear and guilt were not beholden to any logic or reason. He couldn't defeat them through this one step. They were not vampires, and logic the stake through the heart. Chilton should know better.

"No," Will said, "Of course it doesn't make sense to blame myself. My daddy made his own choices. So did the man. I couldn't control either of them. But that's not the point. I know all of that. I've always known it. I still believe it's my fault. I can't help it."

Chilton clicked his pen absently, his posture more relaxed and casual than Will felt was appropriate.

"Sure you can," Chilton said, "You have complete control over yourself. Stop believing things you know aren't true."

Will sighed and put his face into his hands. He had thought Doctor Chilton could help him. He had thought all he needed was a little therapy and he could be restored to the confident, carefree kid he had been at thirteen. He had been so wrong, and now he had told Chilton things about himself he wished he could take back. He had allowed himself to be vulnerable, and he regretted it.

“Maybe my brain doesn’t work the way you’re used to,” Will said softly, “What if you can’t help me?”

Chilton sat forward, clutching his notepad and pen as if Will might say something that revealed the key to the universe and he couldn’t bear the thought of not being prepared to write it down.

“Of course I can help you,” Chilton said, “I just need to understand more about what happened to you. You need to tell me what happened.”

Will shook his head, unable to say what he was thinking for fear of making Chilton angry. Because he wanted to say that he had been wrong to come. He wanted to say that Chilton didn’t know how to help him. He only had so much confidence because he had never met someone with Will’s unique brand of damage. Will was broken, and Chilton didn’t know how to fix him.

But Will couldn’t say it. He could imagine making Chilton angry, and hearing those words from his lips. The command that had controlled him all those months he had been left in the dark. He could even imagine Doctor Chilton grabbing him by the hair and throwing him against the wall. Will could feel the impact of his skull against the drywall, and hear the crack it would make. He could imagine himself clawing the eyes out of Chilton’s skull in retaliation and pure hate. He could see it all so clearly, and it felt like the only thing stopping it from happening was his silence. His determination to not make Chilton angry.

He knew it wouldn’t happen. He *was* smart and logical. He knew that even if Chilton was the kind of person who would do that, he could never get away with it. Not in his position.

But that didn’t matter. Will knew all of that and it didn’t change anything. He was still afraid of it happening, and he couldn’t bring himself to risk it.

That was what Chilton didn’t understand. He didn’t know what it was like to know you were safe, but feel your heart beat against your ribs and try to escape your chest. He didn’t understand how it felt to know your fear was unjustified, but being unable to stop your hands from shaking as you struggled to breathe. How it felt to know you wouldn’t be driven to kill again in this room, but fearing that outcome just the same.

Chilton didn’t understand.

Will never went back to Doctor Chilton after that day, but the doctor tried repeatedly to get him to. Will had to block his number and stay far away from his office for fear of running into him.

Will couldn’t talk to him anymore.

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“What have you been up to, boy?”

Lirette sounded a bit more tired than usual, at least Will thought so. It could have just been his imagination, trying to frighten him about the eventuality that Lirette would die. Now that Will had someone else, and didn't need him anymore.

But he did. He did need Lirette. More than ever, now, because he couldn't talk to Hannibal about what was really bothering him. Not yet. There was too much riding on his ability to keep talking to and spending time with Hannibal. If he lost it all at once, he couldn't be sure how he would handle it.

"Oh, you know," Will said, feigning complete nonchalance because he didn't want Lirette to know how nervous he was, "the usual. Work, fishing, the dogs."

"Ah!" Lirette cried, "the dogs. How are the little dears? You still have Max? Your new favorite child is Winston, right?"

Will laughed and held the phone out to where the dogs were sitting, motioning for them to bark. They let out a chorus of sound that stopped when Will motioned again. He put the phone back to his ear and heard Lirette laughing.

"Yeah, I've still got Max. He's getting up there in age, but he's up and kicking. Winston has taken his place as therapy dog, though. He just knows how to do it and when. He's also real soft, so it's extra nice."

Lirette chuckled.

"Good. I'm glad I did one thing right by you at least. I did my best, but no one can ever be sure if what they do is going to work in the long run. How have you been with that Doctor of yours?"

Will hummed, trying to think of the easiest way to be honest without making Lirette get after him for not acting.

"I-uh. Well, I stayed at his place the other night," Will said, "He woke up early to make me breakfast because he was afraid I would try to leave before he could feed me. He made me something special, because I made a big step with my recovery, actually."

Lirette crowed with delight, only coughing a bit before he could stifle it. He was genuinely pleased, and Will didn't know yet if it was because of what had happened with Hannibal or what he had said about his recovery.

"Tell me what you did, boy," Lirette said, "What made your beau so pleased he had to treat you special?"

Will grinned, flushing and running his hand through Max's fur as he sidled up to Will's leg. It was nice, to have someone to talk to. And to have something nice to talk about with Lirette. Over all these years, he couldn't remember having anything really good to tell Lirette until meeting Hannibal.

“I looked my boss in the eye,” Will said, feeling a bit silly for it being something so small, “Him and one of my coworkers. I had to, to get them to listen to me. And I didn’t have an attack.”

Will heard Lirette clap enthusiastically, if weakly. Will was glad he could make Lirette happy, even if he hadn’t had the chance to tell him the truth about the Ripper case. Not yet, but Will knew it would happen soon.

“I’ll be damned, Will,” Lirette said, “I admit I didn’t expect that, but I’m happier than a dead pig in sunshine. That boy works miracles by my book. I’d sure like to meet him and congratulate him in person. I don’t suppose you’re planning a vacation down here with him any time soon.”

Will laughed, shaking his head.

“Not as of yet, but I’ll try to wheedle him,” he said, an empty promise, but it was fine, “But I agree with you about him. He really does work miracles. If you could just taste his cooking, sir, you’d know he’s something else. He made me gumbo because he thought it’d make me happy.”

Lirette had a clear grin in his voice when he spoke again.

“I knew you caught yourself a good fish when I saw the way he looks at you. I’m glad you’re happy. I’ll bet my left foot it wasn’t as good as Care’s gumbo, though. She had a touch no one could beat. And a voice like Aretha Franklin. Oh, she didn’t like to sing in front of others, but when she got into it she could have sung the angels down from heaven.”

Will was starting to get nervous. Lirette had only ever gotten all sappy like that about Caroline when he was about to take a turn for the worse medically. It hadn’t happened in a while, but this was getting there.

“Care wasn’t a shy woman, but she wasn’t proud enough to show off that part of herself. Her cooking, because she had worked on it all her life, but her voice that was a gift from God, she wouldn’t.”

Lirette sighed fondly, and Will’s heart ached.

“I wish I’d gotten to hear her sing,” Will said, feeling like there wasn’t anything else he could say in that moment.

“I wish that too, Will,” Lirette said, seeming to have come back to himself, “but I shouldn’t go on about her. You hear from Macy recently? She promised she’d come down for Halloween this year, attend our little party here with me. I’d like to see her face again.”

Will hummed in thought. He hadn’t heard from her. He usually got his updates on her life from Lirette, and other than that only learned anything about her from the postage on his Christmas aftershave gift.

“I haven’t heard from her, no,” Will said, “But it sounds like you’re going to have a good time. I’m happy for you.”

Lirette coughed.

“I don’t normally look forward to our parties here, but I expect I’ll be able to stand it with Macy there.”

Will laughed.

Chapter End Notes

Sharing his small triumph with Lirette, Will has such a nice little bubble of support. With Hannibal helping him, it's expanding a bit.

Up next: Jack has some good news for once. Things finally get exciting.

48

Chapter Summary

Will finally gets what he's been wanting all along. Or, at least one of the things he's been wanting.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Will, we’ve got something.”

Will frowned.

“Is it something I want to see?” he asked, wary after the last time Jack had called him.

“I’ll leave that up to you to decide,” Jack said, apparently also wary of earning Will’s frustration, “but I think it is. I’ll send you the address.”

Will checked his watch.

“Jack, I have another lecture in-”

“Seventeen minutes. I know. Doctor Bloom should be there to relieve you of your post. Unless you want to wait until we have all of this in the labs.”

Doctor Bloom walked through the door to the lecture hall just as Jack was saying it, and Will smiled at her.

“No, I’m on my way,” he told Jack, quickly gathering his things, “Send the location and I’ll be there. You asking Lecter in as well?”

“No,” Jack said, and he didn’t exactly sound happy about it, “Lecter is only a consultant, and he’s got patients today. He won’t be in until later. That’s not a problem, is it?”

His keeper.

“Not at all. I was just wondering what to expect. See you soon.”

Will put his phone into his pocket and turned to greet Alana. She was smiling, but her body language betrayed she wasn’t exactly sure what to expect from Will today. She wasn’t as comfortable around him without Hannibal there. That was something they shared, though Will knew what to expect from her more than she did from him.

“Hello,” Will said, hoping his smile didn’t betray how awkward he felt.

“Hi,” Alana said, “how are you, Will?”

Will huffed a laugh.

“Better than I have been in a while,” he said, “Sorry you keep getting pulled into this to cover for me. I think that’s Jack’s way of showing he likes you.”

Alana laughed, and she was instantly more relaxed.

“I get the feeling he wasn’t too happy with how I did on the case I helped with, but that’s probably just because he’s too used to it being you. Aside from our mutual love for dogs, I don’t get the feeling we have all that much in common.”

Will shrugged, picking up his things and starting on his way to the door. If he had time to think about that comment longer, it might smart. As it was, he was in a hurry.

“We both like Hannibal’s food,” he said, “Thanks for teaching my class. See you later.”

Alana waved, and Will got the feeling she genuinely did find him some level of charming. As bizarre as that was to think, he knew he had put on his best face for her both times he had talked to her, after that first disaster, and this one hadn’t been long enough for it to break. The dinner had been under Hannibal’s careful guidance. So there had never been too much risk of humiliating himself there. Hannibal would not have allowed it.

Was Hannibal a control freak? Will thought that more than likely, though he seemed to be the exception to the man’s control. He thought Hannibal found it more interesting and exciting than anything when Will subverted his expectations, and Hannibal hadn’t shown any inclination to control Will. Just the way people treated Will.

In some way, this was another endearing trait to Will. He had so little control over his life, as long as he had lived he had been subject to the whims and desires of others. But Hannibal could offer him control, and didn’t want to control Will along with everything else.

Was that the true reason behind Will’s feelings? He didn’t think it was a large part of it, but he would be remiss to think it didn’t play any role in his rapid descent into the inescapable pit of obsessive love.

Will turned his thoughts to the Ripper, pushing all other thoughts away for the time being. He needed to get into the headspace of the killer, so he could more easily discern whether or not this scene had been the work of the true master.

If it wasn’t the Ripper this time, and Will assumed it wouldn’t be another from their organ harvester, Will would have to rethink his stance that their plan to draw him out would work. If the Ripper hadn’t shown up yet, it meant he wasn’t going to. It meant Will had been wrong. It meant Will didn’t know the Ripper as well as he thought he did.

But he had to work on the inference that it was the Ripper, at least until he saw for himself.

This was good. If it was the Ripper, Will would finally be able to see one of the scenes for himself. In person. Right up close and personal. As long as it wasn’t in a confined space, he

would be able to just take in all the details and see through the Ripper's eyes.

He would feel what the Ripper felt, and know him. Know him from the inside. He could use the Ripper's confidence and power, allow it to wash over and drown his fears and doubt. Just the thought of it was heady and left a taste on Will's tongue like salt and metal. This could be the key to his full recovery, to healing all those old wounds by overcoming the effect they had on him.

The Ripper could be Will's salvation.

Was Will willing to be the Ripper's damnation, if that was the case? Would he really be able to put him in prison if this was how he found the way to get better?

Will didn't know, and for the moment he didn't care all that much. He would burn that bridge when he came to it, and only then. For now, he just wanted to get there.

The location was a warehouse, vaulted ceiling and windows letting in the afternoon sun. Will could hear his steps echoing in the large empty space as he approached the group of agents and techs. He could see the flashes of the cameras, and hear the hushed voices of the people as they tagged evidence and discussed how to transport everything back to the labs. They were clustered so closely together Will could only catch glimpses of the body as they moved around.

Once he was nearer, Jack motioned everyone away so Will could get through to the scene. Will would normally have thanked him quietly and waited for instructions, but today he was too eager to get right to it. He walked through, his eyes fixed on the scene and his heart beginning to thud steadily in his chest.

It was the Ripper.

It was beautiful.

The young man was kneeling, his head back and his mouth agape, almost as if in euphoria. What contradicted that impression were the gaping holes where his eyes had been. There were deep scratches and gouges in the flesh around the sockets, and blood had been allowed to flow down the sides of his face and into his short blond hair. His hands had been placed onto a trophy, and the flesh that had come into contact with the gold plated surface seemed to be charred.

Will barely noticed Jack ushering everyone away, too fixated on the scene in front of him to care.

The boy had been cut open somewhere. There would be organs missing. The Ripper always took organs. Will came around the front of the scene and saw something that took his breath away.

The boy's chest had been cut open, in a typical y incision like an autopsy. Blood had been allowed to smear and drip down his torso here as well, covering him in dried maroon. That wasn't what really fascinated Will, though.

In the barred light streaming in from the windows, just from this specific angle, Will could see the true design. There were sprays of shattered glass in many colors on the floor behind the boy. They were arranged in a clear shape, and caught the light beautifully, combining with the shape of the boy's body to create something too beautiful to express.

They were huge, colorful wings. Extended to either side of the boy's naked shoulders, an enormous wingspan spread out to create the image of flight. Eyeless and euphoric, the boy was flying.

Will felt as if someone had given him an injection of pure elation. He felt as if he himself could take flight, his wings bursting through his flesh with terrible force and tearing him away from the earth. He hadn't even entered the mind of the killer yet, but he felt so filled with delight and power. As if he could do anything and be anyone. He could raze the earth with the wave of his hand, if he only wished it.

Will crashed down back into his own body, and he was faced with the reality of the scene. He needed to learn something about the killer, instead of just filling himself with his own reaction to it.

He needed to read the Ripper in this.

Will took in a deep breath, able to taste the blood in the air. He closed his eyes, and allowed himself to find the mind of the Ripper and take hold of it.

At once, Will felt bigger, more confident, more sure. He looked down at his hands, now shrouded in shadow, and they didn't have even a hint of a tremor in them. He looked back up at the dead boy and saw that he was alive and whole again, a gentle breath lifting his chest and his wide eyes filled with fear.

He's paralyzed. I gave him something so he wouldn't have a chance to fight or scream. He will be aware of what's happening to him, until he isn't. Until his heart stops beating, and the neurons in his brain slowly stop firing. I don't need him to be awake, but I want him to be.

This is not retribution for a betrayal. I do not know him personally. We have never met, but he knows my face. What he has done to earn this was a great discourtesy. He was terribly rude. That is all it takes to forfeit a life in my eyes. Rudeness is unspeakably ugly to me, and I will not let this one pass.

That as it is, this isn't about him, either. The piece of art I will be making of him is not solely connected to his nature or his misstep. This is about me, and you. You are the one meant to see this picture. Everyone else, the agents and lab technicians, are incidental. They can't see, and they won't understand. This is for you. Don't you see? This is what I want for you, and I want you to know it.

He cut the boy open and removed organs. This was the last surgery the boy would ever have. He didn't need these organs any more. He didn't need kidneys where he was going. The kidneys are intentional, though not necessary. They are only to send a message.

I took his lungs, so he no longer carries the burden of breath. I leave his heart, because that's one thing that I must leave whole for you. One thing that I want undamaged from you.

There will be no mistaking it. This is my work, and I am leaving my signature for you. So there will no longer be any confusion. I am free, and I am watching. I have no intention of letting anyone take on my mantle, or steal my work.

This is my design.

Coming back to himself felt more like bleeding than anything this time. Will slowly became more himself, and less the Ripper. Even then, the mind of the Ripper lingered like a touch reluctant to leave. Like a shadow burned into his retinas.

Something had changed. Something big.

Chapter End Notes

Hehe~ Did you enjoy that? I've been excited for this chapter for ages. Finally got a Ripper kill.

Up next: Will starts having some realizations, and we get more Beverly!

49

Chapter Summary

Will works some details out with Jack, and Beverly offers some advice and reassurance.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"What are you saying?" Jack demanded.

Will was pacing, unable to stop from fidgeting. He felt jittery and excited, full of energy with no place to go.

"It's the Ripper," he said, "it's definitely him this time. There's no mistaking the purpose, the artistry, the design. But something has happened to him. Something's different. He usually doesn't target his tableaus toward anyone. But this one, it was a letter. He's trying to get a message to someone."

Jack was scowling. He was confused and frustrated. That was clear to see, and Will understood why. Jack didn't think this got them any closer to catching the Ripper. Will understood, but he was too distracted to really address it. He was swinging wildly between feeling light and floaty, as if he almost didn't exist, and feeling buzzed and anxious like a hot wire.

"I think he met someone he wants to confess to," Will continued, "not someone like him, but someone who might accept him the way he is. Someone he wants to be understood by."

Will stopped, frowning.

"Do we know who the dead kid is?" he asked.

Jack huffed.

"Some intern at a local paper," he said, flipping through some papers on his clipboard, "His name is Jacob Foltz. He works for the Baltimore Banner."

Will snapped his head around, staring at Jack with wide eyes. Jack's own eyes widened when Will's met them, and Will almost didn't notice he was doing anything that would be seen as unusual. His mind was racing.

"Can you find something out for me?" Will asked, speaking slowly because he wasn't sure he even wanted to know this.

Jack spread his hands.

“I’ll try,” he said.

Will nodded.

“Can you find out if he was at the press conference?”

Jack’s eyebrows shot up in alarm.

“Do you think the Ripper is going after all the reporters that were there?” he asked.

Will shook his head, pacing again and chewing on his lip.

“No. If I’m right, it’s just him. If he’s the one that snuck in early.”

Understanding dawned on Jack’s features, and Will knew they were on the same page now. At least on this.

“The one who took pictures of you and Lecter before the conference,” Jack surmised.

Will nodded.

If that was him, Will would have to think harder about this. It would mean this was a message to him, personally. At least partially. It would mean the Ripper had noticed him, and this was his way of showing it. Unless Will had just allowed himself to get too close, and got all his wires crossed. He couldn’t imagine what else it could mean, though. The only person this kid had crossed was Will, and Will had been trying to get the Ripper’s attention, too. The Ripper was so intentional, always, that Will couldn’t imagine he had done this by accident.

Maybe it had been a message to two different people, one of them being Will. Telling Will he had been noticed, and telling the other they were wanted. It seemed unlikely, but it wasn’t impossible, and it wouldn’t sound any more unlikely to Jack than Will’s other idea.

What if Jack decided to take Will off the case because of this? What if he thought Will was in danger, and told him to stop? Will couldn’t bear thinking about it. He had only just gotten into the Ripper’s head, and he didn’t want to have it taken away from him.

He would have to talk to Hannibal about it. Get another perspective. Hannibal would set him right, and he wouldn’t tell Jack.

Will would have to push his conversation about their relationship further back, in that case. He couldn’t waste his time and energy being worried about losing Hannibal when he needed his help like this. He shouldn’t try to push all of this onto Hannibal at once.

And Hannibal might not feel the same way about Will after they talked about this. He might be horrified by the things Will was discovering about himself. At this point, Will thought that was unlikely, but it wouldn’t do to underestimate the power such things could have. He would just have to wait and see how Hannibal reacted when they talked, and work from

there. If nothing else, he thought Hannibal would still be his friend, even if he decided he couldn't love Will anymore.

"The Ripper killed him because something he did was rude," Will said, "If he's the one who took those pictures, that could be the reason. We can be sure the Ripper was watching, and reading up on what was said. He would see the pictures, and know they hadn't been taken with our knowledge. It was rude, and that's all it takes for the Ripper."

Jack wasn't happy, and Will was worried about what he might be thinking. It wouldn't take a genius to think Will might be in danger, and Jack was smart.

"You gave your statement that Abel Gideon is the Ripper," Jack said, "Will the Ripper see that as rude?"

Will huffed and shook his head.

"If this kid is the one who took those pictures, I don't think I'm in any danger. If it's him, I think the Ripper knows it was a trap, and he's letting us know he isn't fooled. Since you and I are both still alive, I think we're in the clear for a while."

Jack stared Will down as he considered that. It was an expression Will could imagine Jack using on a suspect during an interrogation. It was the kind of look meant to break a lie.

But Will wasn't lying, and he was still high off the images he had seen when he was recreating the murder. Jack wouldn't be intimidating him today.

"Alright," Jack said, "I'll take your word on that, but the moment I think you're in danger I'm putting a security detail on you."

Will nodded. He wouldn't have expected anything less. He just hoped it wouldn't come to that. He didn't think he could handle having a bunch of agents hanging around his property, and he absolutely wouldn't let any of them into his house.

But things were changing. Will was changing, and he thought something with the Ripper was also changing. Will couldn't predict what was going to happen.

Whatever happened, he thought things were going to go fast now. Everyone would have to prepare for it.

Will couldn't wait to see what the Ripper would do next.

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Once everything was at the labs, Will refined his analysis some. All the major points were the same, but he was getting a sharper image of what everything meant. He kept a lot of it to himself, afraid Jack wouldn't understand. After he talked to Hannibal about it, he would know what he could tell Jack.

Beverly sidled over when Jack was distracted talking to the other guys. She looked Will over appraisingly and must have concluded he was okay to talk to today.

“Brian is still bummed out over you proving him wrong,” she said, “he seems to think you’re scary now. I think it rocks that you stood up to him. They used to think you were a pushover.”

Will huffed a laugh, glancing over at where Zeller was talking to Jack. When he saw Will looking, Zeller quickly turned away, as if he had seen a ghost.

“I used to be,” he said, “but it’s good to know I’ve made an impression. I see you’re not spooked by me.”

Beverly chuffed.

“No, I’m not scared of you. By the amount of dog hair on your clothes, I’d say you’re a pretty nice guy. You can usually trust a guy who likes dogs. And, I don’t think Lecter would be so friendly with someone who’s not at least halfway decent. He’s basically tethered to you at the hip whenever you’re both around.”

Will felt his face heat with a blush, and he huffed a soft laugh.

“Well, that’s something, I guess. I didn’t realize the dog hair was that noticeable. I should probably invest more time in taking care of that before I leave the house, huh?”

Beverly grinned.

“You’re the psych guy, I’m the fiber gal. The only other person likely to notice is probably Lecter, since he cares so much about his clothes. But he doesn’t seem to mind, so I wouldn’t worry if I were you. By the way, we found the organ harvester. He stole an ambulance to perform another surgery. Nearly killed the guy. Lucky we had asked Lecter to come with us. He hopped right in and saved the guy’s life.”

Will felt a pang of jealousy that he didn’t quite understand. He wished he had been there to see it. He could imagine Hannibal, stepping up into the back of an ambulance, shucking off his jacket and rolling up his sleeves. Will could hear the snap of the latex gloves. He wished he had been there to see it. Maybe he could start working in the field now. He was getting better, and it had been a while since he’d had an attack. Maybe he could do it.

It was probably wrong of him that the motivation to return to the field was that he didn’t want to miss Hannibal in action like that. But Will wasn’t about to tell anyone.

“That’s good,” Will said with a nod, “So that means Zeller *knows* I was right, then. Call me petty, but it’s nice to prove him wrong every now and then.”

Beverly nodded.

“Don’t I know it,” she said, “He’s mostly just annoyed. He was the clever one before you started working with us. He feels like you’re intruding. He’ll get over it, though. Maybe try setting him up for a clever something or other. He’ll like you more if you make him feel like you collaborated on a joke. It’s stupid, but trust me on this.”

Will smiled. He liked Beverly.

“I’ll try that,” he said, “is it what you did to get him to like you? I don’t really get the sense he’s more clever than you.”

Beverly smirked.

“I plead the fifth.”

Chapter End Notes

Phew! So much stuff going on! Will's getting really close to the Ripper, now, but maybe not quite close enough. He's getting there.

Up next: Will finally starts to talk some stuff out with Hannibal, gets even closer to the case, and gets some bad news.

50

Chapter Summary

Will talks to Hannibal about the Ripper. Realizations are made that bring him even closer to the whole truth. It's not all good.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“How was it, Will?” Hannibal asked.

Will was pacing around Hannibal’s study. He had hardly been able to settle down since seeing the scene, and he still had energy buzzing under his skin and making him restless. For two days, he had been thrumming with excitement.

“It was amazing,” Will said, a little breathless, “Before I even got into the Ripper’s head, I was overcome by how beautiful it was. It’s hard to believe Jack could have had any doubt, or that he ever thought that other killer could be the Ripper. It was like day and night. The Ripper does everything with purpose and intent. Nothing like what we found in that motel.”

Will scrunched his nose in distaste at the memory.

“Tell me what you saw,” Hannibal said.

Will stopped, looking up at the ceiling for a moment before he closed his eyes.

The image burst forth on the backs of his eyelids, having replaced the grey eyes of the man. Now, closing his eyes filled Will with euphoria, and he smiled.

“The young man had his kidneys removed, but they weren’t important. What the Ripper wanted us to notice was his eyes, and his chest. His lungs were gone, but not his heart, and he was stitched back up with blood being allowed to stain his skin, and the eyes were removed. His eyes, though. God, you should have seen it, Hannibal. The eyes. They were taken out viciously, leaving tattered edges to the gaping holes.”

Will turned the image around in his head.

“But the most important part of the entire picture was the wings.”

In Will’s mind, the shards of glass shone brightly, each emanating their own light and illuminating the entire cavernous building.

“Made of colored glass, two magnificent wings spread from each shoulder, so long as you stood in front of the boy when you looked at him. They glittered in the light of two barred windows, and cast a mosaic of colored lights around. It was the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.”

Will remained with his eyes closed for a moment longer, reluctant to leave the vision. He had a hard time pulling himself out of the scene, and an even harder time if he allowed himself to slip into the mind of the Ripper. He enjoyed the feelings of both far too much, and he wanted to stay.

That was dangerous, and Will knew it. He would have to talk to Hannibal about it.

Will opened his eyes, and saw Hannibal looking back at him with blatant adoration. Though he knew how Hannibal felt, it still caught him by surprise every time Hannibal showed it so openly like that. It almost made him uncomfortable, but today it was exactly the reassurance he needed. He had just told Hannibal the worst thing he had in his head, and Hannibal wasn’t losing interest. He wasn’t going to abandon him because of this.

“You see it the way the Ripper does,” Hannibal said, “The way he meant for it to be seen. What do you think he meant by it?”

Will was almost startled by the question. He had forgotten that the meaning behind the scene wasn’t obvious to anyone other than himself. Even if Hannibal could see it, because he was also intelligent, he would want to hear Will’s thoughts about it.

“That’s something I’m not sure Jack will believe me about,” Will confessed, “If I told him all of it. I’ve told him most of it, but there’s one thing I don’t know if I can say to him.”

Hannibal tipped his head.

“Why can you not tell Jack?” he asked.

Will sighed.

“Because no matter how he reacts, I lose,” he said, “If he believes me, he’ll think I’m in danger and try to put a security detail on me. If he doesn’t, he’ll think I’m unstable or too close, and he’ll take me off the case. My only safe option is to not tell him.”

Hannibal nodded thoughtfully.

“Tell me about it,” he said.

Will smiled.

“I’ll tell you everything I told him, and see if we’re on the same page from there,” he said, “basically making you check my work.”

Hannibal nodded his assent.

“I think the Ripper met someone, or found someone,” Will said, “Someone who can understand him. Someone he hopes will accept him. I don’t think it’s another killer. It didn’t feel like he was talking to someone that’s like him in that way. He might be hoping they will change, and become like him, but I don’t think that matters all that much. This is someone the Ripper wants to confess to.”

Hannibal was listening intently, and Will had begun to pace again.

“The victim was a kid named Jacob Foltz, and he’s the one who took those pictures of us at the conference. The ones he shouldn’t have been able to take. That’s why he was killed. The Ripper abhors rudeness. I never saw it before because I wasn’t close to it. Discourtesy. That’s all it takes.”

Will sighed and ran a hand over his face.

“Now, tell me if that’s all nonsense before I go on. Because this is where things start to get convoluted.”

Hannibal considered it for a long moment. Will appreciated that he took the time to actually think it over instead of instantly agreeing with him.

“While I am certain I know far less about it than you, I find no glaring fault in your conclusions. Are you concerned that this is a confirmation you have garnered the attention of the Ripper?”

Will huffed a laugh.

“That’s exactly what I think,” he said, “But I’m not concerned about it. The scene says it all. The Ripper is telling us he knew we were trying to draw him out, and he’s gloating that we still won’t catch him. He doesn’t consider it rude, what I did. Maybe because it’s my job to hunt him down. Either way, I don’t think I’m in any danger.”

Hannibal nodded, apparently mollified by Will’s assertions.

“Then what concerns you?” he asked, “Is it the fact that the Ripper seems to be sending messages to two separate parties with a single scene?”

Will nodded, then shrugged.

“That’s just about it,” he said, “Except the reason I’m worried is that I’m not sure the messages *are* meant for two separate parties.”

Hannibal raised a brow quizzically.

“One of them was obviously for me, yeah,” he said, knowing what Hannibal must be thinking, “because it was so clearly targeted. But I’ve got an inkling the other one might also be for me.”

Will paused to allow Hannibal to say something, that it was ridiculous. He didn’t.

“Hear me out,” Will began again, pacing faster as the speed of his thoughts picked up, “I haven’t met him, probably, but I’ve been in the news recently and he knows I’m on the case. What if, like Stammets, he thinks I can understand him? What if I’m the one he wants to confess to?”

Hannibal mulled it over.

“The one he feels may accept him as he is,” he added thoughtfully, “That is certainly a possibility. It would be quite the strange series of events for two killers to fixate on you in that way, but it may merely be a consequence of your nature along with your profession. Are you still afraid he may come after you?”

Will shook his head.

“Not after this,” he said, “If I’m the one he wants, he has no intention of hurting me. If not, he still told me he’s not angry about what I’m doing. If nothing else, I think he finds me amusing.”

Hannibal smiled. Will thought he probably had no idea how appealing it was to him to think the killer was watching him. The Ripper had noticed Will, and now he was a part of it all in one way or another. It was a thrill, and Will couldn’t help being pleased.

“So, what do you think?” Will asked, “Have I gone completely nuts, or could I be right?”

Hannibal considered again, allowing the silence to grow between them, broken only by the sound of Will’s steps on the floor and the distant sound of Baltimore traffic.

“If you are the intended recipient of both messages, you must look closer at every detail,” Hannibal said at last, “see if there is anything to indicate how long you have been in his sights. It’s possible there is more he means to tell you, but only if you can see that you are the intended target.”

For a moment, Will wasn’t sure what Hannibal meant by that. He had the entire scene memorized. What could he possibly need to look at closer? Then, with all the finality of a lock tumbler clicking into place, he saw it.

The missing lungs. A stag head out in a field. An open chest with no breath inside to be constricted. Crows flapping around the body of a girl.

“The lungs,” Will said, freezing in place, “He took the lungs to tell me.”

Will turned and stared at Hannibal, amazed at himself for not having realized it sooner.

“He’s the copycat. The Ripper hasn’t been dormant. He’s been camouflaged.”

Will couldn’t believe he hadn’t seen it sooner. The Ripper had been disguising his kills, attaching them to the counts of other killers. He might have been doing that for all the years he had been inactive. And no one had even considered it. Because it’s not what serial killers do. They don’t play games like this. They don’t want to confuse in that way.

Only the Ripper.

Hannibal stood, walking to Will.

“Do you think the Ripper has been watching you since the Hobbs case?” he asked gently.

Will shook his head.

“I don’t know. If not, he at least knows I worked it.”

But why? Why was the Ripper telling this to Will? Why would he be letting Will put these pieces together? Surely, he didn’t expect Will to keep this from Jack, or to stop doing his job. This was a risk, and the Ripper saw fit to take it, for a reason Will couldn’t yet discern.

“Do you think the Ripper is capable of feeling love?” Hannibal asked, snapping Will out of his reverie.

Will frowned, meeting Hannibal’s eyes. They were very close, now, and he could see little red flecks in the brown of Hannibal’s irises. They were beautiful.

“I don’t know,” Will said softly, “if you asked anyone else, they would most likely say no, of course not. Intelligent sociopath. Sadist. Incapable of feeling empathy or love. But I… I don’t know anymore. Whatever he feels, I guess for me, he believes it to be something akin to love, I think. That’s why he’s giving me these clues. Why he’s letting me get so close. I could catch him. But he wants me to know.”

“He wants you to know *him* ,” Hannibal said, matching Will’s hushed tone.

Will nodded.

“He wants me to accept him as he is.”

Will’s phone rang, and he mentally cursed. He pulled away from Hannibal and checked it, surprised to see it was the home Lirette was in. He had a moment of panic, wondering if something had happened, but he pushed it away. Why would they be calling him? They should be calling Lirette’s family if something was wrong.

“Give me a second,” Will said, pacing across the room from Hannibal to answer. Hannibal nodded and resumed his seat.

“Will Graham,” Will said into the phone.

“Mister Graham, I’m sorry to call you in the evening, but are you close with Duke Lirette?”

It was a woman’s voice, and her question initially confused Will. He knew Lirette’s first name, but he had never used it, and mostly forgot about it entirely. He was always just Lirette to Will.

“Um, yeah. Yes. What can I do for you?”

Will was nervous. His mind was trying to tell him every possible bad thing that could have happened, and he wasn't sure if he was overreacting or not. He didn't know why she would be calling him if nothing was wrong.

"I'm sorry, again, Mister Graham. I know no one likes receiving calls like this. You were listed on his contacts, so I thought I should call. I'm afraid Duke passed away about an hour ago. I'm so sorry."

Will couldn't say anything. He just ended the call and dropped his hand to his side. He might have dropped his phone. He wasn't sure. He felt entirely disconnected from his body, as if someone had dropped a shade over his mind and cut it off from everything. Anything he perceived through his senses was passing him by without entering his thoughts. He was empty.

"Will?"

Will was aware of Hannibal calling his name, but only in the vaguest sense. It made no difference one way or the other if Hannibal was even there or not.

Hannibal's hands came to Will's face, cupping his jaw and tilting it so Will was looking Hannibal in the eye. His gaze was unfocused, and it was only after Hannibal's thumbs swiped them away that Will realized his cheeks were wet with tears.

"Will," Hannibal said, "come back to me. Don't go."

A sob wrenched itself from Will's chest, and he fell forward, pressing his face into Hannibal's shoulder. He clutched at Hannibal, unable to do anything other than cry. Hannibal held him, making soft shushing sounds, and led Will to the couch.

"You're alright, Will," Hannibal said softly, carding his fingers gently through Will's hair, "You'll be alright. You're safe here, with me. Just breathe."

Will cried for a long time before he could breathe again. He was sure he had left a large damp patch on Hannibal's clothes from his tears, and he would feel bad about it later. For the time being, he wasn't thinking about anything. He just felt a bone deep grief.

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry.

Up next: The immediate aftermath

51

Chapter Summary

Will starts dealing with fresh grief.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will was off of work, and Hannibal was helping him make arrangements. The funeral was in a week, and Will needed to be down in Louisiana for it. Alana had agreed to take Will's dogs for the time he was gone, and Jack was leaving him alone for the time being.

Will asked Hannibal to come with him.

He hadn't worked up the courage to confess how he felt, but he couldn't imagine going through all of this without Hannibal there with him. He needed his support system, now more than ever. Hannibal had agreed and immediately cleared his schedule for the three days Will would be out of the state.

Will was feeling numb, and he was so grateful to Hannibal for making sure things happened. He didn't know if he would have the ability to do any of it.

"Will, do you want to stay here with me for the night?" Hannibal asked, "I worry you should not be alone."

Will blinked slowly, thinking it over. He knew isolating himself was the wrong response to his grief, but he did need some time to think. Some time by himself to work things out in his mind. To get an idea of how things would look going forward. To understand what life would be like without Lirette.

Even if it was only one night, Will needed to be by himself.

"I won't be alone," he said, smiling sadly, "I'll have my dogs."

Hannibal nodded. His expression was understanding, and Will thought he really did understand what it was Will needed. Hannibal was the only person Will had ever met who seemed to inherently understand him, and know what was best. He was really just perfect, as if he had been made specifically for Will. It was amazing they had managed to find each other, and Will didn't want to lose him.

"Do not hesitate to reach out if there is anything at all you need, Will," Hannibal said, "and be sure to eat and drink plenty of water. Even if you do not feel like doing so."

Will huffed a soft laugh, feeling like he might cry again. He had been doing a lot of crying just recently, it felt like.

“I’ll try,” he said, “Thank you for everything, Hannibal. I don’t know if I’d be able to get through this without you.”

Hannibal smiled and put a hand on Will’s shoulder.

“You can survive more than you think,” he said, “but I am pleased I am here to help you, in any way I can. I would not want you to go through this alone.”

Will nodded, closing his eyes against the tears threatening to come. His chest hurt with the intensity of his feelings, both grief and love at war within him. His gratitude and his devastation in contrast, gripping his ribs like barbed hooks. He felt like he was going to fall apart.

Hannibal pulled Will into a hug, surprising him, but succeeding in pulling all his broken pieces back together. In Hannibal’s arms, Will felt like he was whole again, and an actual person.

“Be safe, Will,” Hannibal said, releasing him.

Will nodded and left, having to pull over halfway home when his vision was blurred by tears.

Lirette, who had been there all these years, who knew so much about what Will had gone through, and had helped him function well enough to make it to adulthood. Lirette, who had put the pieces of a broken boy back together as best he could, and taught him how to mend his own wounds. Lirette, who had seen the love in Hannibal’s eyes from the little television beside his bed. He was gone. Forever. Dead.

Will didn’t know if he would ever recover from it.

—

Will’s phone dinged, and he checked it.

There were some images from Jack.

- I know you’re off, and I didn’t want to bother you, but I don’t know what to do about this. Is it the Ripper? Just give me your honest opinion. If I’m overstepping my bounds, just let me know and I’ll shut up, but I thought I should at least ask .-

Will opened the photos, and his mind filled with a haunting sound. It was music, but contorted and wrong.

A man had been turned into a cello, his vocal chords fashioned into strings.

Will saw why Jack would think this was the Ripper. It had style and staging. It was eccentric. But it wasn’t the Ripper.

- It's not the Ripper. After the last scene, this would be anticlimactic. This person has killed before, but never like this. It's a message, probably to another killer. Most likely to the Ripper, but I can't be absolutely sure. Check if the vocal chords have been treated. Send whatever you find to Doctor Lecter to get his opinion. -

- And don't text me again. -

Will sighed and set his phone down. Even when Lirette was dead, the world had to keep on going. Nothing had come to a stop, nothing had paused just because Lirette had died. Will wasn't allowed to rest, even though he felt like he couldn't move most of the time, like he was underwater and everything he did was harder and slower. Everything was dulled and colorless.

But the world didn't care.

Will fed the dogs and took them out, walking slowly around the house a few times. He couldn't bring himself to play with them, but they played with each other. Winston was the only one who seemed to notice something was wrong. He stayed by Will's side, looking up at Will and whining softly every so often. He knew Will was unhappy, but he didn't know what to do to fix it.

Will didn't know how to fix it either. He didn't think there was anything anyone could do.

Hopefully, Hannibal would be able to give Jack some insight. Will thought he probably could. It would be better if Will didn't have to get into this new killer's head right now. He was so wrapped up in the Ripper, it would be a bad idea to get more of his wires crossed by working on another case.

If all else failed, Will could work on it after the funeral. If he felt up to working at all. With Hannibal's help, Will thought he could do it. He would have to try to get back to normal eventually. Hannibal could help him with that.

An image flashed into Will's head, making him stop in his tracks and put a hand over his eyes.

Lirette, in a casket. Pale and dead. Unmoving, unbreathing. Dressed in an old uniform that had been pressed to severe lines that directly contrasted the character of the man no longer behind the face. Cold and lifeless and gone.

Just gone.

Will closed his eyes tight, shaking his head to discard the image. It didn't want to leave, determined to cause him distress and hurt.

He would be hurt enough when he saw the real thing. He didn't need to imagine what it was going to be like, torturing himself with what he couldn't avoid.

He didn't know how he would survive the actual funeral. Aside from just Hannibal. Everything hinged on Hannibal. Hannibal was the key to everything, as unfair as that was to

him.

Everything was unfair to Hannibal. It was unfair that Will wouldn't tell him how he felt. It was unfair that he had to support Will and take care of him so much. It was unfair that he would now have to deal with being the only functioning person as they traveled together.

As true as that was, Will knew Hannibal would do so happily. He liked taking care of Will, feeding him and supporting him. Giving him the tools to heal and improve. Hannibal liked it.

Maybe that was why he had changed from surgery to psychiatry. In surgery, you couldn't watch the slow process of healing in your patient. You were with them only in their worst moment. Hannibal clearly thrived off the ability to witness healing, so this was a much better place for him to be.

Whatever was the cause, Will was glad for it. If Hannibal hadn't moved to psychiatry, Will never would have met him. Will would still be the frightened, cowering, unhappy version of himself he had been for so many years.

Will thought of Hannibal, effectively banishing the unpleasant images of his friend in a casket. He was able to continue, preparing for his trip and wondering if they had been able to contact Macy. He knew she was in New York, but he didn't have an address for her he could trust to be current. She was living an unstable life.

Someone ought to contact her. She was Lirette's daughter, and only child.

Will wondered how she looked. She had been a very pretty young girl, her mother's dark complexion and hair, but her father's facial structure and nose. Macy Lirette probably didn't have any trouble getting dates, now as a woman. Unless she had picked up some bad habits and allowed them to destroy her body. Will worried that was what had happened to her in her quest for Broadway fame, but he hadn't seen her since she was still a child. Lirette hadn't known, or hadn't mentioned as much to Will, but it was possible his status as her father had blinded him to the warning signs.

Will supposed he would find out how she had been when they saw each other at the funeral. So long as she came.

Who else would be there? Probably not many people he knew. He had met Lirette's direct family, just by virtue of being at their house so often, but that was the extent to which he knew anyone in Lirette's life.

It would be hard, not just from the grief. Will would have to meet people and talk to them, explaining who he was. He guessed at least a few of them would have heard of him from Lirette, and he would have to be prepared for that.

Thank god Hannibal would be there with him to help soften the blow. To act as a buffer for all those personalities hitting him like waves. If Will believed God was there, and had a hand in anything, he would have prayed and praised him.

Chapter End Notes

Tobias Budge, anyone?

Up next: Will gets a scare.

I just won't give him a break, huh.

52

Chapter Summary

Will is put through an emotional roller coaster. So is Hannibal.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will frowned at his phone. Jack was calling. After Will had restated his boundaries for this off time, the only reason he should be calling was if something was wrong. Something serious.

What if it was the Ripper? How would Will be able to do anything in his current state? If it was the Ripper, Jack still shouldn't have been calling. He knew Will was taking some time off for a good reason, and Will believed they had come to a truce, at least temporarily. Jack knew better than to call for work.

Will answered, confused and already nervous.

"What is it, Jack?"

"Will. I'm sorry to bother you. I'm at Lecter's office. There's been a-" Jack was cut off by someone asking him a question. He didn't bother to pull the phone away from his face to answer. "Bag and tag it! Yes, put both bodies in the truck and get them to the labs!"

"What happened?" Will asked, his chest tightening with panic.

Something happened to Hannibal. There were bodies. At his office. Jack was calling Will about it.

Was Hannibal dead?

"Sorry, Will," Jack said, "It's crazy. I'm gonna have to let you go. He insisted I call you before we do anything else."

Who? What? Will was full of more questions than Jack seemed to have time to answer, but there was one he had to ask.

"Is Hannibal alright?"

There was a pause as Jack spoke to someone else again. When he came back, he was hurried and distracted.

“He’s alright. Worried about you.”

And that was all. Jack ended the call, leaving Will with the beginning of a panic attack. Will fretted for only a moment before he made up his mind and grabbed his keys.

The weather was turning cold outside and a breeze bit at the skin of his face as he headed to the car. He was trembling slightly as he slid the key into the ignition, but he managed to get it started and get on his way.

“You don’t need to breathe,” Will told himself quietly, “You don’t even have lungs, so they can’t be constricted. Your ribcage is empty except for your heart.”

His heart was beating fast, but the mechanism worked and his breathing came easier.

It wouldn’t do anyone any good if Will passed out behind the wheel or had to pull over to have a panic attack.

He just had to get to Hannibal. He had to lay eyes on him. Jack had said he was alright, but all that promised was that he was alive. Will had no idea what condition he was in.

What the Hell happened?

Hannibal was a psychiatrist. That wasn’t supposed to be a dangerous job. And it couldn’t be connected to Will this time.

Unless it was the Ripper.

What if the Ripper had gone after Hannibal after all, despite what Will had thought? How many bodies had there been? Jack had said both, so two. Unless there were more and he was only referring to two of them. Hannibal was alive, right? Jack said he was. But Hannibal hadn’t called, and Jack hadn’t put him on. What if Jack had been lying so Will wouldn’t panic or do what he was doing right now? Heading to the scene.

What would the Ripper do with Hannibal? Despite everything, this thought held a high rank in Will’s priorities, and he couldn’t help but wonder.

Will had talked to Hannibal only the day before. There hadn’t been time for anything too extravagant. But elegance didn’t always require extravagance. The Ripper could have made a wonderful tableau, while keeping it simple. And if it was to punish Will, it would undoubtedly be brutal. Hannibal would have suffered much before he finally died. Because the Ripper would have wanted Will to hurt when he saw it. If it was a punishment.

But it might not be a punishment, now that Will was really thinking about it. It more likely was closer to what Eldon Stammets had been trying to do. A gift for Will, or another message. To destroy everything Will had until all that was left was the Ripper.

No matter what the intention behind it, Will was sure it would be beautiful.

These were the thoughts that kept Will from having a full attack while driving to the office. He reached Hannibal’s office in record time, grateful he hadn’t passed any speed traps on the

way. There were FBI vehicles still around and an ambulance. Agents were swarming around, but not rushed. Will blew past them all, flashing his badge at anyone who so much as looked at him as if they might stop him. He made it to the door of the actual office, and refused to hesitate there. If he allowed himself to pause, he would probably freeze.

There were people all over in the office, still tagging and bagging bits of evidence. Will glanced all around before his eyes landed on Hannibal, sitting in his chair beside the desk.

Hannibal had been in a fight. That was clear. His nose had a cut across the bridge, his lip was split, and his hair and clothes were in disarray.

When their eyes met, Will's relief was reflected and magnified by Hannibal's. They were both relieved to see the other, and Will felt his chest loosen.

Jack turned and saw Will as he walked over.

"Will. It was the symphony killer. He came to kill one of Doctor Lecter's patients after he killed the officers I sent to interview him. Doctor Lecter killed him in self defense when he tried to kill him too."

Will only barely heard Jack as he rounded the desk, scanning Hannibal for more injuries. There was a lot of blood, in Will's opinion, and Hannibal was clearly in pain. Why he wasn't at the hospital yet Will didn't know. Hopefully the blood didn't all belong to him.

"He told me he killed you," Hannibal said softly, and it struck Will right to the heart, "I worried you were dead."

Will remembered everything Lirette had said, all the things he had seen, and everything he knew about how Hannibal felt. He was suddenly hit with the knowledge that if he didn't do something now, he never would.

Will reached out and took Hannibal's face in his hands. Hannibal's eyes grew wide as he realized Will had reached out first. It was the first time Will had initiated touch since Hannibal had been taken by Stammets.

Jack had wandered away, likely noticing Will and Hannibal were both ignoring him. Will hadn't noticed, though. He didn't care. Jack had a job to do. Will had something infinitely more important, and it couldn't wait.

"I was so afraid," Will said, feeling his eyes begin to sting with tears. He had been doing a lot of crying these past few days. He knew he was liable to cry even more in the days coming. "Jack said you were alright, but I was sure you weren't."

Hannibal lifted one of his hands and put it over Will's on his jaw. He was still looking up at Will with wide eyes full of wonder and anticipation. He knew what Will was doing, and he was waiting for Will to do it the way he was comfortable.

"I can't bear the thought of losing you," Will said, shaking his head, "especially if I don't at least kiss you first."

Will bent down gently and pressed his lips to Hannibal's. Hannibal was frozen, allowing Will to do what he would. Perhaps he was also wary of the agents all around them. Will had forgotten everything other than Hannibal.

"Let me take you away from here," Will said, pulling away gently, "to the hospital, or to your house. Let me go with you."

"Yes," Hannibal breathed, his eyes fluttering shut as if overcome with relief. Will could relate.

Will nodded and pressed another quick kiss to Hannibal's lips before he pulled away to talk to Jack.

"Hannibal needs to get out of here. Are you done with him?"

Jack looked Will over appraisingly. Will had an idea what he saw.

"He gave his statement. He can go, but we'll want him to stay in touch."

Will nodded and turned to go.

"Will," Jack said, making him turn back, "I'm glad he makes you happy. Just don't let it get in the way of the job."

Will smiled, huffing a laugh. Jack might have seen what Lirette had seen, and known this might happen. He was smart, and it was his job to know how people work. Maybe he had been hoping Will wouldn't let it get to this point, or maybe he had been waiting for them to finally cross that line. Either way, he wasn't angry, or even a little upset.

"Thanks, Jack," Will said, and returned to Hannibal.

"Take me home, please," Hannibal said when Will took his hands. His grip was firm, as if he expected Will to be torn from him at any moment. Given what he had just been through, Will understood that entirely. He had no desire to let go either.

"Of course," Will said, "whatever you want."

Hannibal was limping as they made their way out to Will's car. They didn't even discuss which car they would take, or how the other car would make it to wherever they ended up. They didn't need to. Will was taking care of Hannibal this time, and he would take care of it all.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you're all happy with that! I've been working up to this for forever!

Up next: Hannibal has to deal with his injuries, and some of Will's insecurities.

53

Chapter Summary

Will has the chance to do something for Hannibal in return for everything he's done for Will.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal didn’t want to go to the hospital. He claimed he had been seen briefly by an EMT, but would care for his wounds by himself. Will was worried, but allowed it because he dreaded the thought of a hospital visit right now. He didn’t like hospitals.

Or doctors.

Funny, that he had fallen in love with a man who had been a doctor, and was now a psychiatrist. Two professions he held little love for.

Over just the short drive to his home, Hannibal seemed to lose much of his energy. Will recognized it as an adrenaline crash, and was glad Hannibal wasn’t trying to drive himself. Hannibal had been hurt, and was clearly not in the best way, but he was gorgeous. Will wondered if he should feel guilty for finding it so attractive to see Hannibal in this state, but he figured it didn’t matter all that much. He had plenty to feel guilty about, but Hannibal had never wanted him to. Hannibal accepted his every thought and word.

Will helped Hannibal to the door, supporting him the way Hannibal had done for Will when he had been exhausted. Hannibal was limping, and Will was anxious to make sure he was not permanently damaged.

Hannibal asked to be brought to the study, where he could sit on the couch. Will lowered him carefully, aware of every wince or sharp breath from the other man. When Hannibal was settled, he smiled gratefully and gave Will directions to find his medical kit.

It was strange to be wandering around in Hannibal’s house by himself, but Will was focused on his task and didn’t linger. Will also found a linen closet and grabbed a few towels, knowing there was likely to be more bleeding, and wanting to protect Hannibal’s furniture.

Will returned, nearly dropping the items he was carrying when he set eyes on Hannibal.

Hannibal had stripped down to his undershirt, and was taking off his pants. Will knew why, and should probably have been expecting it, but he hadn’t thought that far ahead. He had been entirely focused on being helpful to Hannibal, and hadn’t thought about the specifics.

Will quickly gathered himself and knelt in front of Hannibal, setting down his burden and helping him pull the plaid fabric over his socked feet. Hannibal sighed and nodded gratefully, settling back onto the couch a bit more. Will folded the pants and set them on top of the stack Hannibal had made with the rest of the clothes, then lifted the medical bag and put it on the couch by Hannibal's hip so he could easily get to the contents. As Will did this, he saw Hannibal's skin break out in gooseflesh, all up his arms and over his legs.

While the house had central heating, the change in the weather must have caught Hannibal by surprise and he hadn't turned it on yet.

Will cursed under his breath.

"Let me get a fire going," he said, "And then we'll get a look at whatever he did to you."

Hannibal nodded yet again and laid his head back. He was more exhausted and in more pain than he had let on, and Will was going to have to get after him for it later. Now, he had to focus on the fire.

Will started a fire and built it up, making sure it would burn hot and long enough for them to get Hannibal taken care of. He was a bit jittery with the memory of Hannibal's lips against his, and the anticipation of everything that would come as consequence.

Turning back to Hannibal, Will saw the man was cleaning a wound high on his leg, one of the towels underneath to save the couch from any bleeding. Will walked over and sat beside Hannibal, inspecting the wound. He frowned and hummed in displeasure.

"He stabbed you," Will said, casting his mind back to what he had seen in Hannibal's office, though he hadn't been paying much attention at the time, "your fancy ass letter opener. You must have been putting up quite a fight for him to resort to that kind of thing."

That broke Hannibal out of his silence, and he smiled.

"Seeing as I came out the victor, I would have to agree," he said.

Will huffed and nodded, taking the alcohol wipe from Hannibal and cleaning the wound more thoroughly. It was in a place difficult for Hannibal to see, and he allowed the touch without complaint.

"I think it needs stitches," Will said, furrowing his brow slightly, "I can do it if you want, but it might be better if you go to the hospital for it."

Hannibal stared at Will with open surprise and wonder, making Will fidget a bit.

"Will Graham. Do you mean to tell me you know how to suture?" Hannibal asked.

Will flushed, ducking his head and smiling sheepishly.

"I live out in the boonies, and I adopt stray dogs," He said, "I taught myself so I could take care of them. And myself if I ever needed it, but I haven't yet. I've never done it on a human, which is why it might be better if you go to a hospital."

Hannibal was looking at Will like he'd hung the stars in the sky, and Will knew he was going to end up doing the stitches.

"You never cease to amaze me, Will," Hannibal said, "I would consider it a privilege if you would stitch me up."

Will huffed, but accepted the supplies Hannibal offered to him from the bag.

"Did you hit your head in the fight?" he asked.

Hannibal smiled, watching curiously as Will pulled on a pair of latex gloves.

"Yes, though I do not believe I have a concussion or any brain damage. I believe I would feel this way regardless."

Will shook his head, making a note to check Hannibal for signs of a concussion once he was done with this. He would have to be sure he was taking care of him properly. Will wasn't used to taking care of anyone other than himself, but it felt nice to be giving Hannibal something in return for everything he had done.

"Want to tell me what happened?" Will asked, "Why he wanted to kill you, of all people?"

Hannibal considered it for a moment.

"My patient, Franklyn, told me he suspected his friend of the symphony murder. I passed along this information to Jack when he asked for my input. Mister Budge only wanted to kill Franklyn at first, believing it was due to him the police had shown up at his door. He entered the office just as Franklyn asked me if he should have told the police his suspicions. So he realized I knew, and had been the one to report him. That is the nearest I can guess, for what I witnessed."

Will nodded, his focus narrowed to the part of Hannibal's body he was trying to mend. He had worried his nerves would make him tremble and he would only succeed in hurting Hannibal more, but he was calm and steady.

"That sounds believable enough. When did he tell you he had killed me?"

Hannibal wet his lips nervously, clearly still distressed by that part of it all.

"Just before he broke Franklyn's neck. He was angry, and I suspect he had seen the press conference, so he knew your name and likely saw my attachment to you. I know he said it only to hurt me, now. It was quite effective."

Will glanced up, finding Hannibal's warm gaze fixed on him with such powerful affection he was nearly overwhelmed by it.

"I'm sorry," Will said, "for making us both wait so long. And for forcing a killer to get me going. I'm just so afraid of losing you, and I was afraid I couldn't be what you want. I'm still afraid of that."

Will finished the last stitch and clipped the thread. He sighed softly and turned to face Hannibal fully.

“I don’t know how far I can go with you, because of the Man. I might have a panic attack before we even get past kissing. But you’re worth the risk, and I want to try. Are you alright with that?”

Hannibal took Will’s hands in his, Will still wearing the blue latex gloves with small smears of Hannibal’s blood on the fingers. He met Will’s eyes and Will was filled with a rush of affection, feeling what Hannibal felt. It was huge, and Will was amazed by how much one person could feel for another. For him, no less. It didn’t make any sense that someone could feel that for him.

“Will Graham, if I could have nothing more than your presence in my life, I could live as a happy man. I will not take more than you are willing and able to give. I have never felt so strongly about anyone in my life, and I am privileged just to have met you.”

Will huffed, his eyes stinging with tears. For the first time in a long time, they were happy tears.

“After everything I’ve demanded of you, that has happened since we met, you feel that way?” he asked.

Hannibal smiled and pulled closer to Will, still holding his gloved hands.

“Don’t you?” he asked.

Will laughed.

“Yes,” he said, “I guess so. Now, let me look at the rest of you. Budge really got you pretty good, and I’m your doctor for the evening. First item of business is checking you for a concussion.”

Hannibal nodded and took a small flashlight from his bag, likely there for exactly this purpose. Will shone it into his eyes, checking pupillary reaction. They were dilating properly, so Will nodded and set the flashlight aside. Before he could get on to the next item on his list, Hannibal pulled him into a kiss.

Will allowed it, tasting a bit of Hannibal’s blood when he deepened the kiss. His lip was split and had resumed bleeding at the action.

Will had never been kissed before. And he had never realized being kissed could feel so good. Hannibal was gentle with him, and slow. Will felt like a star was burning under his skin, coming nearer to the surface wherever Hannibal touched him. Will’s own lips were sensitive from the constant abuse he put them through, heightening the sensations Hannibal offered him.

Will was breathless when they pulled apart, and Hannibal smiled with a hint of self-satisfaction.

“I have fantasized about that since the day we met,” Hannibal said.

Will flushed darker.

“You can’t be serious,” he said, “when I was your patient, and all you knew about me was that I was mentally unstable?”

Hannibal grinned.

“That day, I learned much about you. Most importantly, I learned that you are uniquely brilliant, passionate, and chronically undervalued by yourself and everyone you come into contact with. You are the most beautiful person I have ever met, and I knew I wanted you to be in my life in whatever way I could have you.”

Will really was overwhelmed, now. He let out a breath and dropped his head, unable to fully understand what Hannibal was saying. He couldn’t believe it. Hannibal was so perfect, and he had seen someone as broken as Will and fallen in love at once. That didn’t make any sense.

Hannibal put a finger under Will’s chin and lifted his face, pressing another soft kiss to his lips.

“I know you cannot believe me just yet, but I hope you will give me the chance to prove it to you.”

Will bit his lip and nodded.

Chapter End Notes

The boundary negotiation begins, and we are in for some soft times. And the funeral, but still.

Up next: A soft morning discussion of limitations and vulnerability.

54

Chapter Summary

Their first morning together, and they are ridiculously cute about it.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal had to take even more time off, meaning the day before they left was free for both of them to spend together. Will was selfishly pleased with that, because it meant he didn't have to share Hannibal with anyone else just yet.

"You sure you're not going to be upset if it scars?" Will asked, tracing a finger over the line of stitches he had given Hannibal, "a doctor could probably do it better."

Hannibal smiled. They were sitting on Hannibal's bed together, procrastinating the moment they would have to part. Hannibal was wearing his boxers, but nothing else. Will was wearing his boxers and undershirt. He found he was more comfortable in a state of undress if Hannibal was as well, though he wasn't yet comfortable with either of them being completely bare.

There were bruises all over Hannibal's skin, and Will wanted to take them away from him. It wasn't right for anyone this perfect to be so hurt. Despite the fact that Hannibal had promised he would heal quickly, Will couldn't help but feel a bit guilty for every mark on his skin.

Will was also guiltily fascinated by the hairs across Hannibal's chest, but he hadn't yet gotten up the courage to run his fingers through it despite how he wanted to.

"I looked at it in the mirror, and you did a wonderful job. Regardless, I do not care if it scars. It can serve as a souvenir for the day I was finally allowed to kiss you."

Will flushed. Hannibal had taken to smothering him in compliments and sweet words like that over the night they had spent together, as if he had been wanting to do so all along and was finally given permission. Will supposed Hannibal expected he would get used to it eventually, but Will doubted he ever would. He had spent all his life feeling like he was too different to really be loved like this. Too broken.

Will tangled his fingers with Hannibal's, glancing at the wrap around his arm where Budge had gotten him with a piano wire garrotte. Will was still amazed Hannibal had managed to win in a fight against the man, and pleased by the idea Hannibal might actually stand a chance against the Ripper if he had the chance to fight back.

Will wondered who would win.

“When did you first feel attraction to me?” Hannibal asked, “Or, perhaps it would be better to ask when you first realized you felt it?”

Will huffed a laugh. Only people like them would have this kind of conversation while sitting in bed on their first morning together. Will wasn’t so much as surprised by the question, showing just how well aligned they were.

“It was, um, during the Eldon Stammets case. Before he took you. Our first dinner. I asked you why you were doing it, because I couldn’t believe you actually wanted to spend time with me. You said you enjoy making me smile. That was the first time I really felt it.”

Hannibal hummed in consideration.

“Before you had touched me for the first time,” Hannibal said, “that is a comfort, in a way.”

Will blinked, meeting Hannibal’s eyes again. Hannibal offered a gentle shrug and an apologetic smile.

“I had worried you might have simply imprinted through touch, as you have gone so long without. It would not be too difficult to believe, and it would certainly put my own actions into a questionable light.”

Will sighed, smiling and shaking his head. Another thing that could probably only happen between them.

“You were worried I had fallen for the first person I had willingly touched in fifteen years,” he said, “A part of me wants to be insulted you doubted my feelings, but I understand. You’re a psychiatrist. You need to be aware of that kind of thing, especially when dealing with your own relationships. You could unintentionally manipulate your prospective partner if you’re not careful, just by nature of knowing how and wanting something.”

Hannibal lifted their conjoined hands and pressed a kiss to the back of Will’s. His eyes were shining with admiration, and Will felt a now familiar ache in his chest.

He didn’t deny it this time.

Will shifted and pulled Hannibal into a kiss. They had done quite a bit of kissing last night, before they had fallen asleep together in the bed. It still sent Will reeling to feel the true desire when Hannibal deepened the connection, as if he could not get enough of Will yet. He felt wanted, and worth the want. For the first time in his life, Will felt worthy of love.

“Aš myliu tave, Vilkas. Ar žinai kad tu puikiai? Tu graža. Būk atsargi, tu viskas turi būtina. Prašau.”

Will stared at Hannibal, filled with wonder at the foreign sounds he was saying like a prayer, like a plea.

It had to be lithuanian. He had the same expression he had worn when he talked about his homeland. He looked pained, but happy. Like the words hurt, but he had to say them, wanted to say them. Will didn’t know what the words meant, but he could see Hannibal felt

vulnerable. The idea that Hannibal would willingly make himself vulnerable with Will was another thing he found difficult to believe.

Will shifted closer, letting his hands run up Hannibal's arms and relishing in the feeling of skin against skin. It was something he had thought he could never have.

Hannibal was deceptively strong. The pretentious plaid suits covered the physique of someone who had true strength and power. It was somewhat intimidating, especially now that Will pictured him fighting a killer. Still, he had been drawn to Hannibal's bare forearms since the first time he had seen them, and now he was given freedom to touch.

"You're too goddamn good to be true," Will said, feeling his face heat at the words coming out of his own mouth, "I wish I knew what those words meant. They sounded perfect on your tongue."

Color rose to Hannibal's cheeks, just a bit. It was a satisfying sight, and spurred Will on further. Careful of the bruise just below Hannibal's sternum, Will let his fingers trace lightly over Hannibal's chest, feeling those rough hairs and sending a shiver through both of them.

"Will," Hannibal said, and he was tense. Worried.

Will looked up to meet his eyes, and realized what the problem was. He withdrew his hand, his chest tightening a bit.

"Sorry, sorry, sorry. I don't know what I- I wasn't thinking. I just-sorry."

Hannibal lifted his hands into Will's hair and pulled him into a kiss, holding him there by his hair. Will might have felt trapped, but Hannibal's fingers didn't curl and grip, instead just cradling Will's skull like something precious. He felt held, but not caught.

"You have done nothing wrong, Vilkas," Hannibal said softly, pressing their foreheads together, "I do not want to hurt you."

Will swallowed. He understood. He did. He just didn't know what he could do. He wanted so much, but he knew he couldn't take, yet. He *couldn't* . The Man wouldn't let him. The man was still there, in his head, ruining things. Will hadn't got rid of him, even though he had been made quieter since he had met Hannibal.

"I know," Will whispered, "But this is what I was worried about. I don't know what I'm doing. I'm going to end up hurting you, because I just can't give you what you want. That's what I didn't want to do."

Hannibal sighed and pressed a kiss to Will's forehead.

"You will not hurt me, Will," Hannibal said, "not by accident. You can choose, remember? You are in control of this. I will let you know where my boundaries are, as long as you do the same as you always have."

Will huffed a sigh.

“You’ve always been able to tell without me saying,” he pointed out, “but I understand what you mean. I’m just sorry this is so complicated because of me.”

Hannibal laughed softly.

“Will, relationships are complicated regardless. With anyone, a relationship is a negotiation of boundaries. This is not a struggle unique to us, and we can overcome it. Do you trust me on this?”

Will smiled and nodded. He honestly couldn’t imagine not trusting Hannibal about it. Hannibal was much more experienced in these things, and he sounded so smart. He sounded like he knew what he was doing. Will was entirely lost, and so frightened by the idea of doing something wrong.

“I trust you. You’re not going to be frustrated that I have no idea what I’m doing in regards to this?”

Hannibal pressed another kiss to Will’s lips, a reassurance. Will was drunk off of Hannibal, completely overwhelmed by the fact that they were together like this. It was more than he ever thought he could have with anyone, and he couldn’t quite believe it.

“I am a patient man, Will,” Hannibal said, “I have waited this long just to kiss you. I can wait as long as you need, even if that is forever.”

Will felt tears sting his eyes, and he blinked them away. He really didn’t deserve someone as good as Hannibal.

“I should probably go make something for breakfast,” he said, but didn’t make any move to pull away.

Hannibal hummed, sliding one arm slowly around Will’s waist to give him a chance to object. He pulled Will closer, nuzzling into the crook of his neck.

“I think we can wait a bit longer for breakfast,” Hannibal mumbled, “despite the fact that I find your cooking fabulously enjoyable.”

Will huffed a laugh, letting his hands come to rest on Hannibal’s arms. He wanted to curl impossibly closer, burrow into Hannibal until there was no way to separate them. He wanted to sink his teeth into Hannibal’s skin and hold on for the rest of his life.

“If you don’t want to come to the funeral with me, or you can’t because you’re too hurt, I-”

Hannibal hushed him, running a hand through Will’s hair in a way that made his eyes flutter closed with pleasure. He almost felt guilty for being so happy at the moment, when he was going to be at Lirette’s funeral in two days.

“Of course I will go with you, Will,” Hannibal said, “Now, more than ever, I want to be there to help you through your grief. I had worried before that I would not last through the trip without crossing the boundaries you had set. Now, I no longer have that to fear.”

Will smiled against Hannibal’s shoulder.

“I guess not,” he said, “I crossed that line for you.”

Hannibal kissed the shell of Will’s ear, making him shiver with pleasure.

“I am eternally grateful that you did, Vilkas.”

Will pulled back, just enough to meet Hannibal’s eyes.

“Are you going to tell me what it is you’re calling me? I know it’s nothing bad, but I’m curious.”

Hannibal considered it for a moment.

“Perhaps soon,” he said, “I confess I feel a bit vulnerable at the moment, and fear you would laugh at me.”

Will smiled.

“Alright. I can wait.”

Chapter End Notes

Aren't they disgustingly in love? I'm sickened. But I love them.

Up next: They head to New Orleans for the funeral.

55

Chapter Summary

Hannibal and Will leave for the funeral, and Will is not having a good time.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will took the dogs on a run, desperately trying not to think about Lirette. He would have time for that later. Three days worth of time. Right now he needed to be there for his dogs, and make sure they knew he cared about them before he left them with a stranger for three days.

So he tried to think of Hannibal, how safe and warm Will felt when they were together. He thought of the soft press of Hannibal's lips against his own, and on those other places Hannibal kissed. Hannibal was devastating, but also perfect. Will felt all broken apart under his touch, and built up under his gaze. He doubted he would ever find anyone else who made him feel the way Hannibal did. It had taken him all this time to find Hannibal. He hoped he wouldn't ever need to find someone else. He wanted to keep Hannibal.

So Will was smiling as he played with the dogs, throwing sticks for them and running around to tire them out. Hopefully it would also tire him out so he wouldn't have as much trouble sleeping. It had been hard in the days since Lirette had died. Will lay awake for hours, his eyes wet with tears, mourning the loss of his friend. If not that, he would wake from a nightmare in which Hannibal had not been the victor in the fight with Tobias Budge. His life was a domino run of bad things right now, and he just hoped the last tile had fallen.

Will wondered what the funeral would be like. He hadn't been to all that many in his life, and his father hadn't been religious when he had died. Lirette was Methodist, as far as Will could remember, though it wasn't exactly something they had talked about much. It would be easier for him if he knew what to expect, but he knew he would be alright. Hannibal would be there with him.

Everything would be alright.

Will called the dogs back to the house as the sun began to set and gave them all baths in preparation for the next day. He checked again to make sure he had packed everything he would need for the trip.

When Will was laying in his bed, listening to the sounds of the dogs breathing, he felt his heart ache again. He couldn't help but think of Lirette, and images of him in a cold, clinical morgue made their way into his head. It wasn't right for someone like Lirette to be gone. People like Lirette were incongruous with the very idea of death.

Will sobbed quietly, rolling onto his side and curling into a ball. Tears fell onto his pillow, and he cried himself to sleep.

—

Hannibal stood at the base of the porch steps, ever mindful not to cross a boundary that had been set, and waited as Will brought his duffel bag out. When Will reached him, Hannibal pulled him into a hug, kissing him softly.

“How do you feel, Will?” Hannibal asked.

Will offered a weak smile. Hannibal was always concerned about how Will felt, in everything. It was a nice contrast to how most people interacted with Will, and he appreciated it even more now that he could be completely honest with Hannibal about his feelings.

That didn’t mean he wanted to tell Hannibal exactly how bad he felt at the moment.

“I miss the dogs already,” he offered, the truth, but a safe truth.

Hannibal nodded, taking the bag from Will and taking it to the car. Will got the feeling Hannibal knew he had obfuscated, but was letting him get away with it for the time being. He would come back to it, Will knew, and Will would be honest when he did. It only took twice for Will to admit to any small deception. He didn’t like lying.

“Alana was happy to take them?” Hannibal asked.

Will nodded, trailing behind and feeling lost.

“More than happy, actually. I almost worry I won’t get them back.”

Hannibal smiled, shutting the trunk.

“I will not allow her to steal your dogs,” he vowed, “if necessary, I will steal them back.”

That managed to make Will actually smile, and he already felt more comfortable about the whole trip. Hannibal wouldn’t let him fall too far into despair. Hannibal would anchor him in reality, and be a constant reminder that all was not lost. There would still be good things to come, even if Lirette was not there to experience them or share in Will’s delight.

“I appreciate that,” Will said.

Hannibal returned to Will, cupping his face in his hands and meeting his eyes with clear concern. Will could imagine what he saw, considering how poorly Will had slept the night before. He probably looked like Hell warmed over.

“Did you sleep at all, Will?” Hannibal asked gently.

Will huffed a laugh.

“Yeah, and no dreams I can remember. But not much, and only after I cried myself to exhaustion.”

Hannibal frowned and stroked his thumbs over Will’s cheeks, as if he could feel the tears that had long since dried and been washed away. Will relished the touch, still amazed that anyone could touch him with such gentle affection.

“I hope you will find some rest on the flight.”

Will nodded, but he doubted he would. He had never really liked planes, and if he’d had the time and ability he would have chosen to drive the entire way to Louisiana instead, just to avoid airports and planes. Planes were chaotic, and close quarters with too many people. He had never been able to sleep on a plane.

He dozed a bit on the drive to the airport, though, his head against the window and Hannibal’s hand periodically settling on his leg or arm. As if Hannibal needed to reassure himself Will was still there. Will felt warmly pleased by it, finding comfort in the reminder he was safe and cared for.

Hannibal took care of everything. It was a huge relief for Will when he realized how convenient it was that Hannibal was a control freak. Hannibal had planned everything, and knew exactly how to get everything done with perfect timing. Before Will even had a moment to worry, they were taking their seats on the plane.

Hannibal ushered Will to the window seat, protecting him from most of the potential interactions with others. Hannibal sat down beside him, offering a reassuring squeeze to his hand, and Will met the gesture with a grateful smile.

“How are you feeling?” Hannibal asked softly as the rest of the passengers took their seats.

Will took a breath and nodded, more to convince himself than anything else.

“Alright,” he said, “and I’m appreciative of the fact that you’re a control freak.”

Hannibal blinked, his face going blank as he considered whether or not he should be offended by that. It was actually cute, the way he was so careful not to react immediately in case he was reading it wrong. Will couldn’t have asked for anyone in the world better than Hannibal Lecter.

Will lifted their joined hands and pressed a kiss to the back of Hannibal’s.

“I’m serious,” Will said, “I knew you were a control freak, before. I’m fine with it because you don’t try to control me. But now, I’m glad. I can let you take care of things like this without having to worry. That’s nice. Thank you.”

Hannibal smiled and kissed Will, having been reassured he was not being insulted. He rubbed his thumb over the back of Will’s hand in a comforting and soothing motion.

Will honestly felt at ease, knowing Hannibal was there and was taking care of everything. He didn’t have to worry about it, because Hannibal was there. It was a novel idea, after so many

years of being entirely independent and going through the worst things by himself. Lirette had been a source of support, but he could never be what Hannibal was for Will now. He had never been in the right position to do this kind of thing for Will.

And he never would.

But Hannibal was there, and Will could trust him with everything like this.

The plane lifted off, and they had two hours before they would arrive in New Orleans. Will watched out of the window for a long while, Hannibal tracing patterns in the skin of his hand as they sat in silence. Hannibal didn't push for conversation, and Will didn't feel like there was anything to be said at the time, so the silence between them was comfortable and safe. Will was thinking about Lirette, but this time he had no urge or need to cry.

He was thinking about how pleased Lirette would be to see him and Hannibal like this. How pleased it would make Lirette to learn how much better Will was really getting. For him to know that the nightmares were starting to dwindle and be replaced with good dreams, strange as they may be. For Lirette to meet Hannibal and learn what an amazing person he was. Will thought Lirette would approve of him, despite that familial urge to consider no one good enough for their loved one.

The fact that Lirette would never learn all this didn't make Will sad just then. Instead, it helped him to feel better for the time being. He felt he was doing what Lirette would have wanted him to do, and was making him proud. Lirette had always said he was proud of Will, and maybe now Will had earned that. Or, at least, was getting there.

Will closed his eyes, laying his head on Hannibal's shoulder. He was tired, and as hard as he found it to believe, he thought he might actually fall asleep on the plane.

Will breathed in deeply, smelling Hannibal's nice cologne. Hannibal shifted slightly to make Will more comfortable, and laid his own head on top of Will's.

The last thought Will remembered before he fell asleep was that he should ask Hannibal to recommend a better aftershave, since he didn't like the one Will used. Maybe he could convince Hannibal to recommend it to Macy if they saw her, so Will wouldn't have to throw away her gift every year.

Chapter End Notes

They're going to talk about the control freak thing more. I think it's a fun little thing.

Up next: They land in Louisiana, and they talk about some things.
(it's actually really soft, and then the next chapter after that starts the actual funeral proceedings)

56

Chapter Summary

A little name calling

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will still was groggy from the short rest when they arrived at the hotel. He hadn't asked Hannibal about their accommodations, feeling he would only be anxious if he allowed himself to think about it at all. He still wasn't surprised to find that Hannibal had booked them a room in a very nice, expensive hotel.

He honestly should have expected as much.

Once in their room, Hannibal all but pushed Will to the bed and made him lie down. Will put up a token protest, but he still felt half asleep so it was hardly more than a feeble attempt to seem reluctant.

"You need to sleep, vilkas," Hannibal said firmly, "less than two hours is not enough. You must fortify yourself for what tomorrow will bring. Sleep, and allow me to take care of everything."

Will sighed and closed his eyes.

"Perks of having a control freak as a partner," he mumbled.

Hannibal huffed, sounding amused. He didn't object or agree, though, so Will wondered how he felt about being called a control freak.

Will sat up in bed, opening his eyes and frowning at Hannibal.

"Sorry. I realize we haven't exactly talked about that. I don't know what you want me to call you," he said, suddenly nervous, "What we should call each other."

Hannibal stopped in his unpacking of luggage, raising an eyebrow at Will.

"What else would you call me, Will?" he asked, "I hope you were not thinking of referring to me as your boyfriend. I fear I'm a bit old for that moniker, and it sounds juvenile."

Will flushed. He'd never had a boyfriend or a girlfriend. That was something the man had taken from him, denying him what most people would consider a regular part of their

everyday life. Hannibal was right, and it felt like they were too old to call each other that, but it was a shame. Will had missed his chance to have that, he supposed.

Hannibal noticed Will's conflict, as he always did, and came over to sit beside him on the bed.

"If I spoke uncaringly, I apologize," Hannibal said softly, "I would be honestly content with whatever title you give me, Will. I am satisfied just to be yours."

Will felt his face heat further and he turned away from Hannibal, trying to hide his embarrassment. He hadn't meant for Hannibal to think he *wanted* to call him his boyfriend. Will had to accept that he had missed out on some opportunities in his life. He expected he was going to miss out on plenty more, and he was alright with that. He had made peace with it.

But that didn't mean he couldn't try out a few things.

"No," Will said, "you're fine. I guess I just hadn't thought about it before, that I've aged out of things like that without ever really having them. It's funny, I guess, but I shouldn't dwell on it."

Hannibal took Will's hand in his, squeezing gently in reassurance.

"Tell me what you are thinking," Hannibal said softly, a request instead of a demand.

Will smiled, feeling unusually shy about what he was thinking of saying. He turned back to Hannibal, but didn't meet his eyes. He reached out and took the fabric of Hannibal's lapel between his fingers, nervously fiddling with it as he spoke.

"Well, we are in Louisiana. People talk a bit different here than Maryland and Virginia. Just a bit. How would you feel about me calling you my beau?"

Hannibal was silent for just long enough for Will to wonder if he had made a mistake by asking. Then, Hannibal had crossed the distance between them and kissed Will.

"It would be an honor," Hannibal said, smiling when Will finally managed to meet his eyes again, "and perhaps this is the right time to express how attractive I find your accent when you allow it to show itself."

Will flushed deeper, having to look away again. He was overwhelmed.

The accent was something he tried not to let out often, though certain words or phrases always came with a tang of southern raising when he said them. It was just harder to be taken seriously in any academic or professional atmosphere when you sounded like you'd been raised in the deep south. He had worked hard to get rid of the accent, just so he could get somewhere in life without being challenged every step of the way because people saw him as an uneducated hick.

He had never dreamt someone would think it was good, much less attractive.

But Hannibal did. Hannibal was too perfect.

“I hope that’s not the only thing you like about me, or I’m fit to lose you in this city,” Will said, trying to make light of something that affected him so profoundly, “Every person you meet is likely to have an accent thicker than mine.”

Hannibal pulled Will closer, nuzzling into the crook of his neck in a way that made Will feel like he might burst into flames at any moment.

“How could I notice anyone else, when I have you?” Hannibal asked.

Will sighed and shook his head. Hannibal’s words were reassuring, but still overwhelming.

“Will you lay with me until I fall asleep at least?” Will asked, “Please?”

Hannibal kicked off his shoes and stripped off his jacket before pulling Will into an embrace and laying on the bed with him. The bed was soft, and the bedding smelled fresh and clean in a way Will wouldn’t expect from a hotel he would book for himself. Or the cheap motels the FBI booked for him when work took him out of town.

Like the one he had been staying in when Hannibal had fed him breakfast for the first time.

Will smiled, thinking about that day. Hannibal had been so careful with Will, but not in the way Will had gotten used to. He had been respectful instead of avoidant. He had recognized boundaries without demanding Will spell everything out for him. He had spoken to Will as an equal, and confessed to Jack’s ruse when he recognized Will had discovered it.

Hannibal had compared Will to a wolf.

“That’s what it means, isn’t it?” Will mumbled, on the verge of sleep, “That word you called me. It means wolf.”

Hannibal stilled, even his breathing coming to a halt, for a moment. He didn’t tense, but Will recognized he was surprised and possibly felt uncomfortable. Will hadn’t really meant to say anything, but it had slipped out in his happy doze.

“You have found me out,” Hannibal whispered, a smile evident in his tone, “I knew you would uncover all my secrets sooner or later. I hope you are not displeased by it.”

Will nuzzled closer to Hannibal, breathing him in and relishing in the solid warmth of the body against his own.

“No, I like it,” Will said, “you’re the only one who’s ever compared me to something strong rather than delicate. You’re the first one to ever treat me like a person, rather than something to be used and replaced. Something that can be broken and discarded. From the first day, you’ve treated me different. Thank you.”

Hannibal pressed his lips to the crown of Will’s head, holding him close. Will wondered if Hannibal really would be able to wait forever for him. It was clear Hannibal believed it now, but Will knew patience could be worn down, and things could change. He didn’t want to hurt

Hannibal by making him wait past the point where he felt he couldn't any longer, but he didn't know if he would ever be ready for that kind of change.

For now, he was content to stay in the protection of Hannibal's arms, let him take care of the things Will couldn't, and finally have someone in his life who was just safe for him to love and be loved by.

"You are the first person who has heard my mother tongue pass from my lips in many years," Hannibal confessed, "I have not spoken it since my sister died."

Will pressed a kiss to Hannibal's jaw, his eyes closed as he was nearing the edge of sleep. He knew this was important, and he loved that Hannibal trusted him enough to tell him. It was amazing to know Hannibal trusted him with his own secrets. Will had confessed so much to Hannibal, and to have that trust reciprocated was more than Will had ever imagined.

"It's beautiful," Will said, "I love your voice."

Will was really dropping off, and he wasn't sure he would be able to keep up conversation any longer. Hannibal must have gathered as much as well, because he didn't say anything else. He just nuzzled into Will's hair and held him until he fell asleep.

Will didn't have any nightmares.

Chapter End Notes

For anyone wondering why Will's dad wasn't named Beau in this fic, like so many people tend towards, this is why. I figured it might get confusing, but I love the idea of Will calling Hannibal his beau. Also, I love the name Monty, so that helped.

Up next: They go to the funeral, and meet some people.

57

Chapter Summary

It's time to mourn, and Hannibal is there to help. Or at least be a supportive beau.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“You look very handsome,” Hannibal said, helping Will to fasten his tie properly.

Will offered a sad and tired smile. His eyes were already red from crying, but he had managed to stop long enough to get ready for the funeral. Hannibal looked much more well rested, and as handsome as ever, even with the fading evidence of the fight. Wearing his full suit, one might almost not notice the healing cut on his nose and the bruise on his jaw.

“Thanks. You look just as good as ever. At least people most likely won’t be looking at me today. A part of me wants to just get this over with, and another wants to make it last. Because once it’s over, it’s real. After the funeral, he’s really dead. I guess in my mind he’s Schrodinger's cat, and going to the funeral is like opening the box.”

Hannibal nodded, pressing a kiss to Will’s forehead.

“I understand,” he said softly, “but you must face it head on. Without opening the box, you condemn him to his state of half existence. Put him to rest so he can be at peace.”

Will closed his eyes, feeling the urge to cry again. He was so grateful for Hannibal, and so glad he was here. Without him, Will was sure he wouldn’t be able to get through this day.

“Yes,” Will said, “He deserves to rest. Let’s go.”

Hannibal took Will’s hand and led the way to where their rental car was parked. Despite the unfamiliar city and streets, Hannibal navigated to the funeral home easily. They were early, but not too early. Will was anxious, and Hannibal allowed them to sit in the car for a few minutes in silence.

Eventually, Will let out a long breath and nodded decisively.

“Let’s get this over with,” he said.

Hannibal pressed a kiss to Will’s hand and they got out of the car.

To Will’s surprise, Macy was there to greet them at the door to the actual hall where the funeral would begin.

“Will? Oh my god. I never thought I’d see you again. I’m sorry it had to be under these circumstances.”

Will offered her a wan smile, marking the fact that she wasn’t wearing any makeup. She had cut her hair short and it was fluffed in tight coils around her face. Will met her eyes for the first time ever, and saw they were red from crying. Probably why she wasn’t wearing makeup.

“Macy, I’m so sorry,” Will said, knowing it was what was expected despite how hollow it felt, “Your dad was the most kind and brave man I’ve ever met. It’s a crying shame he’s gone.”

Macy nodded, offering her own smile of sad gratitude, then turned her gaze to Hannibal.

“I don’t recognize you. Were you one of Pa’s friends?”

Hannibal smiled and offered a hand to shake.

“Doctor Hannibal Lecter. I’m afraid I never had the pleasure of meeting Officer Lirette, but I have heard much about him from Will. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Macy.”

Will saw that Macy was instantly charmed by Hannibal, and that made him happy. That was the closest thing to having Lirette meet Hannibal and then give his approval that Will could get now.

“Hannibal’s my beau,” Will said, knowing Macy would ask for an explanation sooner or later, “That’s why he’s here. I hope that’s not a problem.”

Macy shook her head, smiling.

“Not at all,” she said, “I’m glad you brought him, and I’m glad you could come. I almost feel like you should be the one standing here. You’ve been more family to my Pa in the past years than I’ve been.”

Will shook his head.

“You wouldn’t say that if you knew how excited he was to see you for Halloween,” he said, “but I’m glad I could keep in contact with him.”

Macy nodded.

“I’ll talk to you later, Will,” she said, “You’re both coming to the wake after, right? You don’t have to stay for the whole thing.”

Will glanced at Hannibal, but gave Macy a nod.

“We’ll be there,” he promised, “we’re headed back tomorrow, so we have all of today.”

Macy ushered them both in, her gaze growing distant with grief.

—

The funeral wasn't a very religious affair, despite Will's reservations. When people offered words, they often mentioned God and heaven, but the music that played was all Aretha Franklyn and soft jazz, making it feel much less formal or uncomfortable. There were plenty of people Will didn't know, but they had all known Lirette, and that was enough for the day. Will felt oddly detached from it all, not even crying as he heard stories about Lirette and knowing that others in the room were unable to stop themselves from sobbing. He didn't feel quite all the way there.

Hannibal held Will's hand, the one point of contact functioning as Will's anchor to reality while his mind floated.

The wake was somber, but more relaxed. There was a sense of completion, as if they really had put Lirette to rest and he was at peace. It didn't take long for the first person to notice the outliers in the crowd.

"Hi there. I'm Savannah. I'm Duke's cousin. I don't recognize you, though. Pardon my asking, but how did you know him?"

She wasn't nearly as old as Lirette had been, but she wore her greying hair and lined face with dignity. Will could see a faint family resemblance, but he thought Macy looked much more like Lirette despite her darker skin.

"I knew it was only a matter of time 'till someone asked," Will said, "I'm Will Graham. Officer Lirette saved my life when I was a kid."

Savannah's eyes widened, and Will realized she recognized his name.

"Will Graham. I shoulda guessed. Duke talked about you like you were his own son. He always made it sound like you were the hero of your own story, though. I don't think he really thought he did much for you other than be a friend."

Will smiled sadly. That sounded like Lirette. He had been humble, at least when it came to Will and his ordeal. Will had heard him boast of his accomplishments as a police officer, but he would always object to being called the hero of Will's story. He reserved that title for Will alone, and would defend his stance on it.

"A friend is all I needed," Will said, "But I'm bein' rude. This is Doctor Hannibal Lecter. He's my beau, and he was kind enough to come with me to help with all the socializing."

Hannibal smiled and shook Savannah's hand.

"A pleasure to meet you. I wish I could have met Officer Lirette before he passed. I have heard much about him."

Savannah nodded, her eyes misting up a bit. Will could see that she was only keeping her composure through pure will, and it wouldn't take much for all the sorrow to spill over. He felt some comfort in the idea that he wasn't the only one who felt that way, and he gained a

new respect for rituals like this. Finding community in grief was good for them, and it might help them heal from the hurt.

“Pleasure’s mine, I’m sure,” she said, “and he would have loved to hear you call him officer. The work he did on the force was his pride and joy, though nothing like his pride in Will. Will has always been one of his favorite topics of conversation, after Caroline and Macy.”

Hannibal nodded and placed an arm around Will’s waist to pull him close. Will hadn’t realized how tense he had grown until the touch released some of it. Hannibal must have seen it, though. He always knew.

“Well, I’m glad you have yourself a good man, Will, and it was a delight to finally put a face to the name. See you around. Don’t be a stranger.”

Savannah shifted away, much like a shadow in her black dress. Will sighed softly, feeling his own grief creeping back up on him.

It wasn’t fair that Lirette was gone, and hadn’t had the chance to meet Hannibal. It was cruel. If God existed, he truly hated Will, to continuously take things away when he thought things were looking up.

Will turned and looked up at Hannibal, ready to say something about how afraid he was that something would happen to him. God had already tried twice.

“So, you’re Will Graham.”

Will turned, startled out of his sadness for the moment. The man’s accent was as yankee as anything Will had ever heard, and he was wearing dark bluejeans and a graphic T under a black blazer. It wasn’t appropriate mourning wear, and he didn’t look all that sad either. Still, Will would give him the benefit of the doubt for the moment.

“I am,” Will said, frowning in confusion, “Who are you?”

He had an idea, but he hoped he was wrong.

“I’m Jason. I’m Macy’s boyfriend. I’ve heard a lot about you,” the man said, “Mace says you were kidnapped as a kid.”

Will felt Hannibal’s arm tighten around him at the same time as every muscle in his body tensed. He pictured his chest, empty of lungs, and let out a slow breath.

“I’d really rather not talk about that,” Will said, careful not to show how close he was to a panic attack, “This is Doctor Hannibal Lecter.”

Hannibal didn’t offer his hand to Jason, and it didn’t seem to even cross the other man’s mind. He was looking at where Hannibal’s hand rested above Will’s hip with a clear expression of smug disdain. It was the kind of look that always seemed to have an entire paragraph behind it about how the owner of the face was better than someone else. Usually, they weren’t a pleasant person to be around.

“Mace never said you were gay. I guess she didn’t want anyone to know. Is it because of what that pedophile did to you?”

Will felt his heart speed up, and his chest tightened. He heard echoes of those words from all across the years. He would never escape them. No matter how much he healed, or managed to progress, those sentiments would follow him. They clung to him like a ghost, reminding him of the life he might have had, but had been killed by the man.

Then, Will saw the Ripper’s scene. The one meant for him. The boy with no lungs, and enormous, shining wings.

Free, not because nothing would try to cage him, but because he took it for himself. Powerful because he could overcome and kill anything that did.

Will met Jason’s eyes, feeling rage burn in his veins as he read the hate and prejudice in the other man’s face. He read everything there, and he understood more about Jason than he ever wanted to know.

“Aren’t you *precious* . Macy’s not ashamed of me. If she knew who you really are, she would be ashamed of you. The only reason you came all this way with her is because you hope her dad left her some money in his will. She’s too smart for you, so I’d get out of her life before she figures you out.”

Jason had paled noticeably, and Will almost smirked. He stepped closer to Jason, pulling out of Hannibal’s touch for a moment. He lowered his voice and spoke to Jason with all the anger and malice he dared to show.

“I’d also do a bit of background research on anyone before I make them angry if I were you. I think about killing people for a living, and the last person who upset me ended up dead by the hands of the Chesapeake Ripper. Now, quit bein’ ugly and get out of here. Remember not to hurt Macy.”

Jason looked like he was on the verge of urinating on himself as he all but bolted away. Will felt a dark but wonderful satisfaction at the sight, and he turned back to Hannibal with a smile. Hannibal was looking at him with that naked adoration again, as if he had breathed life into the very world.

“That was probably stupid, wasn’t it?” Will asked, knowing he really shouldn’t have said what he just did.

Hannibal pulled him close and kissed him softly.

“You are never anything less than brilliant, vilkas,” Hannibal said warmly, “I have never wanted anyone more than I want you now.”

Will flushed, pleased by Hannibal’s words and finding them slightly overwhelming.

“I just hope Jack doesn’t find out,” he said.

Hannibal nodded his agreement, then his eyes flicked to someone over Will's shoulder. They weren't going to have a moment to themselves just yet, it seemed. Will turned and saw Macy, standing with an older gentleman. Will thought he looked like a lawyer, at least at first glance.

"Mister Graham?" the man asked, looking between Will and Hannibal as if he wasn't sure which of them he was talking to.

Will nodded, smiling nervously.

"That's me," he said, "How can I help you?"

Chapter End Notes

I skimmed over the actual funeral part, and that's partly because I only remember funerals through a dissociative haze, so I was worried I wouldn't be able to write it in a way that made sense. Wakes are different, because they require interaction with other people so I remember them better. Sorry if you wanted to read the actual funeral.

Up next: Will has a pleasant surprise, and a not so pleasant surprise.

58

Chapter Summary

> Will was left two things. One is a pleasant surprise, and the other is a devastating revelation.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The man's shoulders relaxed minutely, and he returned Will's smile.

"Actually, I think I might be able to help you. At least, in a way."

Will raised an eyebrow.

"I'm Mark Loheman. You see, Macy has informed me that you won't be in town long, and as the only other beneficiary, she gave me permission to speak to you about it today."

Oh. Will had been included in the will. He hadn't expected that, but it did make sense and it explained why Macy had brought this man over.

"That's right," Will said, "I'm headed home tomorrow. What exactly is this about?"

Mark nodded and pulled a thick envelope from one of his pockets.

"Mister Lirette wanted this letter to be given to you, and he also left you his service weapon. I can have it sent to you, if you're flying back home."

Will took the envelope, his brain having a hard time processing this. He still felt like he hadn't come to terms with the fact that Lirette was dead, but now he had to accept the fact that Lirette had left him something. His eyes flicked to Macy, who smiled sadly.

"I always knew, Will," she assured him, "I have enough things on my hands without it, and he bought me a gun for my purse when I graduated high school. It's yours. He wanted you to have it."

Will nodded, swallowing past a lump in his throat. He sometimes thought poorly of Macy, and now he felt guilt for it. She had a hard time just like anyone, but she was a good person. Another person might have been bitter, such an important item being given to someone outside of the family, but Macy was just glad Will was there. She was happy for him.

"Uh, yeah, I'm flying. I can give you an address to send it to. I'm sorry if I'm not bein' as friendly as I could."

Loheman shook his head, holding up a hand to stop Will from apologizing further.

“I understand you were very close to Duke, so you don’t have anything to apologize for. I wish I didn’t have to talk to you during all this, but I had to catch you while you’re in town. I’ll let you be now, Mister Graham. It was a pleasure to meet you.”

And he was gone. Macy lingered behind, clearly wanting to talk to Will a bit more.

“No one’s made you feel uncomfortable, have they?” She asked, her eyes wide and hopeful. It was clear she had no idea about her boyfriend, and Will wouldn't hurt her by telling her in that moment. It would be cruel.

“No, of course not,” Will said, “and I admit I was expecting something a bit more…” He struggled to find a kind way to say what he was thinking.

Macy smiled.

“Methodist?” she asked, “Yeah. Pa didn’t want anyone to be preached at during his funeral. He wanted people to feel welcome. He was thinking of everyone else, even then. I want you to know, Will, that if there’s ever anything I can help you with, all you have to do is ask. I don’t know how much he left me yet, but I want to help you if I can. If there’s anything of his you want, just let me know and I’ll see what I can do.”

Will was floored. He had never really been that close with Macy. She had been born when he was seventeen, and had already moved away, so it was strange to him that she was being so kind to him. When she was also in mourning, at that. Like they were really family. Like they were *close* family. Like Will had any real claim to the things Lirette had owned before his death.

“Thank you,” Will said, his voice a bit choked with emotion as he realized he was nearing tears again, “I’m sorry we haven’t really been that close over the years.”

Macy smiled sadly.

“If you were a hugger, I’d hug the life out of you, Will,” she said, “You look like you need it. You always look like you need a hug, but right now especially. You really don’t know how much my pa loved you. If you knew, you’d understand how much I care about you just because of it.”

Will blinked, a tear escaping and trailing down his cheek. He wiped it away quickly, but he was just so overwhelmed by everything.

“I’m sorry I don’t like hugs, but I can’t express how much it means to me to hear you say that. Thank you, Macy. If there’s anything I can ever do for you, don’t hesitate to ask.”

Macy nodded, then turned to Hannibal.

“Could I talk to you for just a minute?” she asked, “won’t take long.”

Hannibal raised an eyebrow and looked to Will inquisitively. Will nodded, trusting they wouldn't go far away and he would be safe here by himself for just a bit. He was curious what Macy might want to say to Hannibal or ask him. He imagined it would be similar to the talk most partners got from the parents of the other, and it amused him to think of Macy threatening to hurt Hannibal if he ever hurt Will. She wasn't a short woman by any means, but she was smaller than Will, and Hannibal was taller and broader than Will was.

Macy and Hannibal stepped away, their heads together as Macy began speaking in a hushed tone. Will couldn't hear what she was saying, and he didn't try to listen in. He bent the envelope between his hands a bit, not enough to crease it, but just getting a feel for the thickness. There had to be several pages at least, and Will wondered what Lirette would have wanted to tell him.

Will put the envelope into his pocket, knowing it would be a bad idea to read it right here. He was already on a knife edge between composure and a complete breakdown. He would wait.

Sooner than Will had expected, Hannibal was back by his side. An arm snaked around his waist again, and Hannibal pressed a kiss to his temple.

"Macy is quite a bright woman," Hannibal said, "Though of course I find her taste in men to be questionable."

Will smiled and nodded.

"Not everyone gets as lucky as me," he said.

Hannibal hummed vaguely.

A trio of men approached, looking over Will curiously. They almost seemed hesitant, and Will thought he knew why. They were older, not quite as old as Lirette, but clearly not much younger.

"Sorry if we're interrupting," the tallest man said, frequently glancing at his companions as if worried they would leave him on his own, "but we heard you're Will Graham."

Will nodded. He hadn't realized this would happen, but he was slightly flattered Lirette had talked about him so much. It seemed everyone wanted to meet him.

Another of the men, his head adorned with wisps of hair that were somehow still red despite how thin and brittle they looked, grinned from ear to ear. It was just a touch too bright, and Will noted the glance he made to Hannibal's hand on Will's waist. But he didn't say anything rude.

"That's swell. We worked with Duke on the force. He told us all about you. He said you work with the FBI now, catching killers."

Will huffed a laugh and offered another nod, shifting on his feet a bit. He had never been very comfortable talking about himself in this way, and he didn't know what these men had heard.

Hannibal held him close, reminding him he wasn't alone, and that helped. Even under the slightly disapproving gaze of these men, Hannibal made him feel safe.

"I only consult on cases," Will demurred, though he knew it was a bit more than that, "I'm not in the field. I'm a criminal profiler."

The men nodded and hummed in appreciation, the way some men did when discussing sports. Will hoped they wouldn't ask him about sports. He didn't have time to keep up with any of that stuff, and it had never really been his field of interest.

They asked him a few questions about his work, never asking anything he had to refuse to answer. They were polite and pleasant, and Will actually enjoyed the conversation. Despite the slow drain of his social energy, he was able to enjoy himself with the constant support of Hannibal's presence. Just having him there with him made it easier to act like a person, and pretend there wasn't anything wrong with him. To everyone else, he seemed nothing more than a fellow mourner.

They only stayed for a few minutes longer. Will was socially drained and still grieving. He had done everything he could. He left his phone number with Macy in case she needed to contact him, and she gave him hers in return. He wanted to keep in closer contact with her, now that Lirette was gone, and he hoped Jason would do the smart thing and leave before he ended up hurting Macy.

Once they were back at the hotel, Will sat in one of the comfortable armchairs and pulled the letter out. Hannibal said something about food, but Will wasn't really listening. He wasn't sure he had the capacity to listen at the moment. He didn't know exactly what to expect from the letter, and he didn't know if he would be able to handle it yet. But he thought it would be better to read it right away. Another Schrodinger's dilemma he had to deal with.

Eventually, he worked up the courage and opened the envelope.

The letter was hand written, and Will thought it must have been written fairly recently. The scrawl was shaky, but legible, and Will was familiar with Lirette's handwriting.

Dear Will,

I guess this is my last talk with you, huh. Seems weird to think that I'll be dead when you get this, but some things must.

You have a hard time with having confidence in yourself, and you're afraid of hurting others. You never told me why you are so afraid of touching people, or being touched, but I saw the way you left Steve Walters' body, and I know. That might be difficult for you to read, just like a lot of things in this letter will be. I'm sorry I'm adding to your grief, because I know you'll be having a hard time after I go. I'll try to keep it short, but I have enough to say I think I'll probably end up using a couple sheets of paper at least.

I know why you don't touch people, and I think I know why you don't like to meet anyone's eyes either. The fact that you've managed to get where you are now is the most impressive thing I've ever seen a man do, and it's hard to know you don't see it that way. You've forgot more learning than I ever got, and that's something for which I am grateful every day. You've always been bright, and you didn't let anything stop you from learning.

What I have to say next is liable to be hard for you. Perhaps harder than hearing I was gone. Because you've been hiding the truth from yourself for more than half your life now. I wouldn't tell you, except I feel you should know, and I'm the last one left who can. This is my last chance to tell you anything, and I can only pray to God you're ready for it.

Steve Walters had you in that basement for almost two years. You missed two birthdays while you were there. I know you try not to think about it, so you've never done the math, or at least you've purposely forgot. You were fourteen when he took you, and you were sixteen when you called me on his kitchen phone.

I know you don't remember all of your time down in his basement, and that's probably good. I hope you never remember the worst of it. Whenever you can bring yourself to talk about it, you say it was months, so I know you don't remember how long it really was.

If you ask Macy for it, I left a file with all the case information on my bookshelf at home. It should be in my big copy of Sherlock Holmes. Only ask for it if you think it will help. I always thought you might be able to distance yourself from it all if you looked at it like you look at those cases you work on, but it's up to you.

I'm sorry if that was too much to tell you all at once. Letters are funny that way. The only way I can tell you anything is all at once.

I hope Macy-

Will had to stop there, setting the first page down on the table. His eyes had blurred and he knew he wouldn't be able to take in anymore words if he tried to read them.

He set his elbows on his knees and put his head in his hands. He cried hard. He was confused and upset and broken. He had never felt more broken in his life. Never more alone, except when he had been in that basement.

Two years? He had forgotten nearly that much of his own life? If it was a self-preservation attempt by his brain, that meant the things he remembered were the least horrific.

All the things that sent him spiraling into panic attacks. The things that made it hard to breathe. The things that made it so he hadn't been able to even hug his dad or meet his eyes. These were the things his mind thought were *safe* for him to remember.

Will wished he couldn't imagine any worse, but the awful truth was that he could. He had worked in law enforcement for a long time now, and he could imagine plenty.

Not being able to remember was more frightening than trying and wanting to forget. He had thought the worst part was that he remembered, but now he knew the worst part was that he didn't.

The door to the hall opened, and Will lifted his head. Hannibal entered the hotel room with a stack of food boxes, likely from an expensive restaurant. He froze in his tracks the moment Will's eyes met his, and Will could see him taking in every detail of what he saw, deciphering what it meant.

Finally, Hannibal set the boxes on the table and came over to Will, kneeling in front of him and looking up into his eyes with deep concern. He took Will's hands in his own, uncaring that they were wet with tears.

"Is there anything I can do for you?" Hannibal asked fervently.

Will noticed he didn't ask what was wrong. Of course not. If all that was making Will cry was the death of his friend, it would seem foolish to ask. If Will didn't want to talk about it, the question could add to his distress.

Hannibal was too perfect.

"Just-" Will sniffled, "just stay here with me."

Will's voice came out broken and raw, and he saw the way Hannibal reacted to hearing it. Something behind his dark eyes broke, and he pulled Will into a hug.

"I am sorry I left," Hannibal said softly, "I did not think I would be gone long enough for anything to go wrong."

Will shook his head, rubbing his face on Hannibal's jacket and finding comfort in his solid warmth.

"I'm not upset you left," Will told him, "nothing happened. Not really. I just learned something that scares me."

Hannibal held Will tightly, as if promising to never let go. Will didn't let himself know it was a lie.

"You should eat," Hannibal said, "You have not had anything substantial since yesterday, and even then, I saw how you merely picked at your food."

Will smiled, more tears spilling from his eyes. Of course Hannibal had noticed his lack of appetite. The way Hannibal loved was so intense, and all encompassing. He noticed everything, and he would never let another person he loved die hungry.

"Alright," Will said, not letting go, "what did you get?"

Hannibal pressed a kiss to Will's hair.

“I went to the nearest reliable Cajun restaurant and requested whatever may serve as comfort food. I hope some of it may help you. I apologize for not being very educated in this area of cuisine.”

Will sobbed, a mixture of his grief and his relief. Hannibal was too perfect. There had to be a catch.

“Thank you,” Will managed through his tears.

Hannibal carded his fingers through Will’s hair, a comforting gesture Will appreciated now more than ever.

Chapter End Notes

I've been planning this letter since the beginning. If you go back and look, I've been leaving hints that Will didn't quite know how long he had been gone. I tried to leave it easy to gloss over, though, so hopefully this was still a surprise to some of you.

Up next: The boys have conversations about scars and control as they prepare to go home.

59

Chapter Summary

Will gets another glimpse of a vulnerable Hannibal, and Hannibal learns about Will's relationship with control.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will let Hannibal read the first page of the letter as they ate. It didn't say anything Hannibal didn't already know, except what Will had just learned. He wanted Hannibal to know, so he could understand, but he couldn't bear to tell him.

After they had finished the food, which Hannibal had made sure Will had eaten plenty of, they decided to go to bed early. Will would be able to sleep through the night due to his emotional exhaustion, just so long as he wasn't awoken by any dreams. He hoped.

Once they were curled together on the bed, Will's face pressed into Hannibal's chest, Will felt Hannibal begin to tremble.

Will tipped his head up and saw that Hannibal was crying silently. Tears pattered onto the pillow, and he had his eyes closed against them as his body shook.

"Hey," Will said gently, "It's alright."

That was bullshit, but he didn't know what else to say.

"My heart is broken for you, Vilkas," Hannibal said, and he sounded as broken as Will felt, "You are the most beautiful person I have ever met, and you have been treated so carelessly. It is an offense that you have been hurt so deeply, and don't have a scar to show for it."

Will huffed, shaking his head. He didn't understand where this was coming from.

"Would it be better if I was covered in scars?" he asked, slightly bewildered, "I wouldn't look nearly as good for you, then."

Hannibal shook his head, then pressed a kiss to Will's forehead. When he pulled back, he opened his eyes and looked at Will from the fathomless depths of his gaze.

"Physical scars are a catharsis," he said, "All your hurt is on the inside, so no one can see it. Veterans of suffering do not have to explain their trauma when it is visible on their skin. Because yours are invisible, your scars are ignored. It is why people continue to mishandle you. That man did you far more harm than he ever could have known."

Will swallowed. He remembered thinking that he was lucky Steve Walters hadn't hurt him too much physically, hadn't left any scars. He wondered if he really would be better off if that hadn't been true.

"Do you have any scars?" Will asked, "Except for the one you'll have because I'm not trained to suture."

Hannibal nodded and took one of Will's hands gently in his. Slowly, Hannibal lifted Will's hand and slid it into the hair at the back of Hannibal's head. Will felt it, there, and he tried not to press too hard on the slightly raised bit of skin. Hannibal pressed down on Will's fingers, though, making the pads of his fingers dig into it.

"I was given this on the day Mischa died," Hannibal whispered, "The men wanted me to stop fighting them. But I was angry."

Will could feel Hannibal's pain like it was his own, but it wasn't a bad feeling. This hurt had been concentrated and focused into one small point, this area of damaged flesh on the back of his head. Pain, when it was given a focus like that, seemed so much easier to deal with. It was tangible and contained.

Will understood what Hannibal had been saying about scars, now. Pain could be dealt with when there was somewhere for it to go. Some small thing to focus the pain through.

"Even were you covered in scars to show all the harm you have been dealt, you would still be beautiful to me," Hannibal said, and his tone was full of sincere adoration, making it nearly impossible to doubt him, "I would kiss every stitch in the tapestry of your skin, and show you that you are worth the world to me."

Will curled back into Hannibal's chest, unable to keep looking at his face just then. He was overwhelmed by Hannibal's words, and the flood of affection he felt for Will. It was so much, all the time.

Eventually, they managed to fall asleep. Will didn't have any dreams that night that he could remember come morning. He was just safe in Hannibal's arms.

—

The next morning was slow and easy. Hannibal had scheduled everything exactly the way he wanted, so they wouldn't be rushed at any point. Will appreciated that, and he appreciated Hannibal. Hannibal was so organized and tidy. He had all his things packed before they had breakfast, and he was perfectly at ease as they sat down to the meal in their hotel room.

"Do you truly see me that way?" Hannibal asked, making Will pause in his eating and look up at him in question. "A control freak?"

Will huffed a laugh.

"It's not a bad thing, darlin'," he said, "I told you I'm grateful for it, and that was the truth. I also understand it. You control what you can, so it's easier to deal with what you can't. It

makes things a lot simpler for you, and I can appreciate that. It's making things a lot easier for me right now, because I don't have the capacity to take care of everything and you're more than willing to do it. You know what I really adore about you being a control freak, though?"

Hannibal furrowed his brow and shook his head, honestly thoughtful and invested. Will couldn't help smiling at him. Hannibal's confusion was cute.

"I love that you control everything, but not me. Not once have you tried to control me. Who I am, what I do, how I feel. You never tell me how I should feel. *Everyone* tells me how I should feel, have done for all my life. But not you. When I tell you how I feel, or what I think, you just accept it and tell me it's alright. You let me be, without trying to change me. If that's how you are with me, I will support you being a control freak in every other facet of your life."

Hannibal took Will's hand and pressed a kiss to it reverently. He smiled against the skin of Will's knuckles and just held his hand there for a moment.

"Aš myliu taves, vilkas," Hannibal said softly, "forgive me for worrying."

Will smiled and shook his head.

"You keep telling me not to apologize for stuff like that, so I expect you to follow your own advice," Will said, "you didn't do anything wrong that I can see."

Hannibal smiled.

"Very well. No more apologizing from either of us, unless we truly have crossed a line."

Will nodded.

"It's good to know you're fallible, sometimes," Will said, "you've crafted this persona of such perfection that sometimes I forget you're human. That's part of the reason it took me so long to work up the courage to kiss you."

Hannibal looked taken aback, blinking in surprise at the admission. It almost made Will laugh, the way he hadn't realized how he had seemed to Will, despite clearly having crafted his persona over many years to appear perfect to everyone he met.

"I have tried very hard not to pretend with you, Will," Hannibal said, "I have been more vulnerable with you than with anyone else. I had thought it had worked."

Will did laugh, then.

"It worked pretty damn well, for the most part," he assured Hannibal, "Otherwise I never would have told you all the things I have. We've been open with each other. Being open isn't the same thing as being imperfect. Everything you said was always exactly as much as I could handle, and right when it was perfect for you to open up. Even the way you made yourself vulnerable was perfect. That's intimidating, if you didn't know. I always feel like I'm stumbling over myself in comparison to you."

Hannibal nodded thoughtfully.

“You see through my every face. I forget sometimes that I have so many. I forget to take them off.”

Will smiled.

“I might not see through them, but I do recognize them. I’m getting to know all your faces. Maybe someday I’ll know which one is your real one.”

Hannibal smiled, and it was a brilliant grin. He looked genuinely delighted at the idea, and perhaps he saw it as a fun challenge, to see if Will would really be able to do it.

Chapter End Notes

Bringing in a bit more lore from the books, because I'm a nerd. Also changing things up a bit, because I don't think Hannibal actually has a scar from being hit on the head in the books. But I wanted it for this scene. It's important.

Up next: They go home, and Will makes a huge move. Prepare for fluff.

60

Chapter Summary

Will takes a huge step, and confesses something to Hannibal. Hannibal, predictably, handles it very well. ;)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

On the return trip, Will was anxious to see his dogs again. More than that, he was anxious to see what this new relationship would become at home. Before the trip, it had been soft and hesitant, because both of them had been in pain. Now, Hannibal had been given some time to begin healing, and Will had found some closure to begin the process of healing as well. Neither of them had fully recovered, but that was only a matter of time.

Hannibal drove to Wolf Trap under a thick blanket of clouds and walked Will up to the door, insisting on carrying his duffel for him that far. Will had an idea when they reached the door, and he turned to Hannibal with his keys in hand.

“Would- I mean, do you want to come in?” he asked haltingly, not sure what to expect.

Hannibal seemed even more surprised than Will by the offer, his body going impossibly still as his expression showed a conflict of emotions.

“Are you sure, Will?” Hannibal asked, seeming much more hesitant than Will had thought he would be, “this is your sanctuary. I understand that, and don’t wish to overstep.”

Will smiled and took Hannibal’s free hand in his. That too surprised Hannibal, still not used to Will initiating touch.

“This is my safest place,” Will agreed, “but you are my safest person. Because of you, I feel safe a lot more than I ever did before. I want you to come in.”

As if on cue, the sky opened up and began to pour rain. It was cold enough Will could see some ice crystals in it, and he couldn’t help smiling.

“If I believed in God, I would say that’s his way of trying to tell you something,” Will teased, “looks like you’re stuck here, unless you fancy driving home in this weather.”

This time of year, a storm like this could last all night, and it hadn’t even gotten as bad as it could yet. If it froze, it could make for dangerous road conditions. It would really be best for Hannibal not to attempt the drive till it cleared.

Hannibal's eyes sparkled with amusement as he looked out at his car that was being all but drowned in the drive.

"If you are determined to see me in your home, I will only be too happy to oblige."

Will grinned, his stomach twisting with excited nerves. He opened the door and stepped in, quickly scanning to make sure there wasn't anything he would be embarrassed for Hannibal to see.

The house wasn't as neat and tidy as Hannibal's, but Will doubted he would have expected it to be. Hannibal wouldn't judge him for the way he lived. Hannibal never judged him for anything. Will did wonder if he would ask why he had a bed in the living area, but he knew he would tell nothing but the truth if he did. Will had nothing to hide from Hannibal. Not yet, at least.

Will watched as Hannibal cast his own eyes around, noting the bed in the main room with the desk and bookshelves. He didn't say anything yet, just allowing himself to process what his senses were telling him. Will wondered what he could smell with his unusually sensitive nose. It was probably lots of dogs and engine grease, but Hannibal didn't seem at all perturbed by it.

"I'll make something hot to drink," Will said, turning toward the kitchen, "Weather's turning quick this year. I'll have to make sure I have enough firewood."

Hannibal followed Will into the kitchen, now smiling warmly.

Despite the contrast in aesthetics, he didn't seem at all uncomfortable or out of place among Will's somewhat rustic decor. And he looked genuinely pleased to be there, which settled Will's nerves a bit.

Will hesitated, not wanting coffee because he was already feeling high strung and nervous. But he wasn't sure if the drink he wanted would suit Hannibal's taste.

"Uh," Will said, turning back to Hannibal and resigning to just ask, "How do you feel about hot chocolate?"

He felt a bit of heat creep into his face, feeling it was a childish suggestion despite the fact that he had never considered hot cocoa a childish drink. It was merely an indulgence, something he found comforting. Perhaps he was uncomfortable because he had not shared his indulgences with others before. They had always been his alone, so he had never had to wonder how someone else might think of it.

Hannibal offered another fond smile, helping Will settle a bit more.

"That sounds perfect, Will," he said, "a very comforting beverage. And I think it is something that might benefit us both."

Will relaxed and nodded, nearly sighing with relief. He got to work making the cocoa, and called Alana to postpone the dog pickup due to the weather. She sounded more than happy to

keep them for a little while longer, and Will couldn't help but smile at the thought of Hannibal having to steal them back for him. Alana must have heard the smile in his voice, because she sounded oddly querulous when she noted on his mood.

"You sound like you're doing well," she said, slightly hesitant, "in fact, you sound oddly cheery for someone who just attended a funeral."

Will's smile dropped from his face immediately. A part of him flared with anger at her for forcing him to remember his grief, but he knew she didn't mean any harm. She had probably only said it out of habit, being a psychiatrist.

"I just thought of something nice," he told her, "I was thinking about the dogs, and trying not to think about my friend who *just died*."

"Will, I'm so-"

"Thank you, Alana, for helping with the dogs. I'll talk to you later."

Will ended the call, gripping the kitchen counter and trying not to be angry. She didn't deserve his anger. It had been a simple mistake.

Will recognized he was quick to be angry with her because he saw her as a threat. She was close to Hannibal, and had known him a lot longer than Will had. Even though Will knew Hannibal was choosing him over Alana right now, he still felt a deep, unpleasant jealousy toward her.

He would have to apologize for being sharp with her later.

"What did she say to upset you?" Hannibal asked, looking upset on Will's behalf.

Will shook his head.

"She didn't mean any harm. She just didn't think before she said it."

Will could see Hannibal intended to wait him out until he told him what Alana had said. It made Will smile a bit that Hannibal was willing to take his side before he even learned what had happened.

"She said I sound happy for someone who just got back from a funeral."

Hannibal's eyes flashed with anger, but he pushed it away quickly. He nodded thoughtfully and took a moment before speaking.

"That was incredibly unfeeling of her, but I agree that she was more likely foolish than malicious in saying it," Hannibal said at length, "Alana is rarely a fool, but I believe she has a hard time knowing how to act with you, so she may have felt off balance, causing her to make such a misstep. Are you upset with her for it?"

Will sighed, handing a mug of cocoa to Hannibal and bringing his own to the table to sit with him.

“I’m upset, but I shouldn’t be upset with her,” he said, “I tend to react poorly to her, but it’s really not her fault, and it’s just because I’m afraid.”

Hannibal frowned, and his brow furrowed. Will knew what he was going to ask next, and he knew he was going to tell the truth. He wouldn’t lie to Hannibal again, and it really wasn’t worth the effort to avoid the truth either.

“What are you afraid of that would cause you to react in such a way to Alana?” Hannibal asked.

Will offered a wan smile.

“I’m afraid of losing you,” he said, “I mean, she’s known you for so much longer, and she clearly really likes you. I think she might even have been hoping for you to pursue her. No, I’m pretty sure she was. She’s nice, and pretty, and more importantly she’s mentally stable. She’s exactly the kind of person you should want, and the kind of person you deserve. I can’t help but feel that you’ll realize that and leave me.”

Hannibal’s expression turned warm and sad, the kind of look Caroline had always given Will when she realized she had been just a bit too friendly and could have come off as insensitive. Will knew it wasn’t a pitying look, he would have been insulted if Caroline or Hannibal either pitied him at any point. It was simple understanding and sorrow, expressing the feeling one had when they heard someone they hadn’t known had died.

Almost funny, in these circumstances.

“I am sorry if I have allowed these feelings to fester,” Hannibal said gently, “I have known Alana has been hoping for our friendship to develop. I enjoy her company, but I have never felt for her the things I feel for you. I hadn’t thought you would feel threatened by her presence in my life. I hope you will forgive me.”

Will smiled.

“It’s really not your fault,” he said, “It’s just me, afraid of everything as always. I’m getting better, but that doesn’t mean I’m not afraid of anything. I’m just afraid of new things. I haven’t been afraid of losing anyone other than Lirette for a long time. It’s actually kind of nice to have someone I can worry about.”

Hannibal sipped his cocoa, humming in pleasure at the taste. Will watched as his tongue darted out to clean some froth from his lips, and just that little thing made him feel better. Made him feel happy.

“I am also unaccustomed to caring so much for the well being of another,” Hannibal said, “I find it is not an unpleasant thing, despite the inconvenience it can be. Perhaps it is simply nice to no longer feel so alone, even if caring for another offers some discomfort.”

Will huffed a laugh and took a drink of his own hot chocolate. He closed his eyes and savored the sweet and creamy beverage. He had been right that this was what he wanted, and Hannibal had been right that it was comforting. It reminded Will of winter nights with his

father, in the time before the basement. They had lived a bit further north for a time, where it actually snowed, and Will had curled up on the couch with his daddy, cocooned in quilts and holding a mug of hot chocolate just like this one. That had been back when Monty Graham had enjoyed inviting friendly church people in to chat when they stopped by to deliver holiday treats, despite his lack of personal religion.

Back when Will had just been a strange kid, not a damaged one.

“I wouldn’t have expected you to be lonely,” Will said, opening his eyes and looking at Hannibal with a now familiar warmth in his chest, “you don’t have any problem interacting with people, and you can get whatever company you want. You throw dinner parties and you’re a socialite. You don’t have to be lonely if you don’t want to be.”

Hannibal smiled warmly and shook his head.

“Perhaps I do not have to be alone, but a congregation of people cannot cure loneliness if they are not the correct people,” Hannibal said, “I have never found anyone who cures my loneliness before you.”

Will felt his face heat, and he began to scrape the nail of his thumb under his lip. Hannibal was being honest, just as they had wordlessly agreed they would be. They were honest with each other, which often left Will feeling slightly uncomfortable and overwhelmed. It was still alien to him to feel those things in a way that wasn’t horrific or terrifying, and he hadn’t yet figured out a way to deal with it.

Hannibal reached out and pulled Will’s hand away from his face, drawing his attention back and making him meet Hannibal’s gaze.

“When I first saw you, there was a piece of flesh worn raw just there,” Hannibal said, his voice nearly a whisper, “abused to the point where I worried it would never recover. In the past months, you have resorted to this far less, and I would be pleased to never see you do it again.”

Will swallowed, feeling entirely lost. He hadn’t realized Hannibal had noticed, though he knew now he should have seen it. Hannibal noticed everything about him. Hannibal cared so much. He saw so much.

“If I am causing you discomfort, all you need do is tell me,” Hannibal said, pressing Will’s hand to his cheek, “I will stop. I only want to make you feel safe and happy.”

Will took in a deep breath, almost surprised that he didn’t find that difficult at all.

“I’m overwhelmed by you,” he confessed, “by the depth and range of your feelings. I didn’t ever expect to have this kind of thing, and you are just so… good at it. You have more experience in this than I do, and I can’t catch up. Every time I get my feet back under me, you say something that sends me reeling again. Every time I’m about to get used to the way you are with me, you ramp things up and it’s too much all over again. None of it is bad, but I just can’t keep pace.”

Hannibal studied Will’s face, his eyes shining with open affection. Will didn’t know how to deal with him.

Hannibal pressed a kiss to Will’s hand.

“You have not said I have done anything wrong, so I will not apologize, but is there anything you would like me to change? Would you like me to act differently?”

Will smiled and shook his head.

“I just had to tell you, so you won’t be frustrated with me when I fall so far behind. I hope you aren’t disappointed.”

Hannibal smiled.

“Never by you, Will.”

Chapter End Notes

Is Hannibal keeping Will off balance on purpose? Definitely. He's afraid Will is going to figure things out too quickly.

Up next: Girl time! *sparkles*

Yeah, this chapter is a little early. Blame the universe for letting me be sick on new years eve of all days, and I wanted to make things easier on myself by starting this month with an update on the first. Just so I don't have to do math.
Enjoy <3

61

Chapter Summary

Will talks with a couple of his girls, and gets his dogs back.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Eventually, the rain stopped and Hannibal had to leave. Will called Alana and arranged to pick up the dogs, already uncomfortable with how empty the house felt.

Things were going well. Considering the circumstances, it felt strange to think that. But it was true. Will was healing from his trauma and he felt happier than he could ever remember being. He had friends, and he had Hannibal. He was building a life for himself, and it was almost normal.

If you ignored the Chesapeake Ripper, that was.

Will hadn't thought about the Ripper very much since Lirette had died. There had been the frightened obsessing when he had worried the Ripper had killed Hannibal, but that had been all. Other things had taken up his thoughts.

Now, Will was free once more to think of the Ripper, and what the scene really meant. Hannibal hadn't offered any argument against Will's idea that the Ripper was fixated on him. In fact, he had helped Will to see that the Ripper had also been the copycat. Now, looking at it all, it made more sense for it to be for Will than for anyone else. If it wasn't meant for Will, the Ripper wanted him to believe it was.

That wouldn't make any sense, though, so Will had to operate under the assumption that it really was for him.

The Ripper had most likely been watching Will, aside from just tracking him through the news. For how long, Will had no way of knowing. If he had caught the Ripper's eye before Cassie Boyle, it could have been quite a long time indeed. The news would not satisfy them for long. They would need to get closer, see more. Will was honestly surprised they hadn't contacted him directly before now if they had been obsessed with him for that long. It usually escalated faster, and accelerated after first contact.

The Ripper was different, though. They were better than that. It was more than likely they were aware of the patterns, and were purposefully avoiding the adherence to them. Subverting expectations, and making it almost entirely impossible to predict them.

But Will had. He had predicted the Ripper, by laying that trap. He had known the Ripper would respond, even if they realized it was an intentional provocation. It had worked. And the Ripper had left him a message to say he had known. He had known, and had done it anyway. Not because he had to. He wasn't beholden to his urges like that. The Ripper had done it to send a message. A litany of messages, as a matter of fact. To say he was smarter than them, that he wouldn't be caught, that he knew what they were up to, and that Will was the one who could understand him. The one he wanted to be understood by.

How much did the Ripper know about Will?

Will had to assume he knew more than what was on public record. But how far had the Ripper gone? How much had he learned?

Will conjured the image of the scene, the boy with wings, the barred light from the windows illuminating the shards of glass.

If the Ripper didn't know about the basement, a lot about it, that scene had landed far too close to the mark for Will's comfort.

The wings made of broken glass, the barred windows creating the illusion of a cage. The lungs being removed. The eyes. The eyes perhaps most of all. They hadn't been removed cleanly, like the Ripper usually did. They had been gouged out, leaving behind tattered holes and scratches on his face.

Not many people knew about the eyes. Just Hannibal and Lirette. But Lirette had a casefile, which Will could ask for. It was possible, then, for someone else to find out those details. Someone even more clever than Freddie Lounds. She hadn't been able to learn that and put it in her articles.

Will needed the casefile. If nothing else, he needed to know what someone could have found out if they gained access to the police archives. Will would have to do some investigating on his own. He couldn't tell Jack about any of this, or else Jack would want him off the case. He would have to do it on his own.

That was fine. He was FBI, after all, and people generally didn't question that too much. If he could get ahold of someone who had known Lirette, he might have an even better resource. He would have to play his cards carefully, but he thought he could do it, and it might not even be that hard.

If this was a viable route of investigation, Will would have to be very careful. He would be working without sanction, chasing someone he knew was dangerous. Someone he knew was keeping tabs on him. He could very well be risking his life.

But that was fine. It was worth it. This was the kind of puzzle, the kind of investigation everyone fantasized about as a kid. The real detective work, with high stakes. And if he did die on the path to the truth, Will trusted the Ripper to do it. He would be made into something beautiful.

He might not tell Hannibal about everything he was doing. Hannibal would worry about him, and might realize how blase Will was about his own death. While Hannibal didn't judge Will for the things he thought and felt, he probably wouldn't want to allow Will to go down any path he saw as potentially self-destructive.

Before Will left the house to pick up the dogs, he called Macy.

"Will," she said, clearly smiling, though there was a note of sadness he understood, "I'm glad you called. Pa left me a note saying you might ask for some things. Specifically this book. Complete collection of Sherlock Holmes. I figure you already own a copy, but is that why you're calling? Do you want it?"

Will huffed a laugh.

"I actually don't have a copy," he said, "I read them all on loan from a library when I was in high school. Never got around to buying it. But he didn't mention why I might want that book?"

Macy offered the vocal equivalent of a shrug, and Will could hear her moving things around on the other end. She was going through Lirette's things, he thought.

"Said he left you some notes inside. Guess he's still trying to give you advice on detective skills? If you want it I'll send it right quick."

Will nodded to himself, deciding more surely than before.

"I do want it, if that's alright. But you don't have to rush it. I know you have a lot to deal with."

Macy let out a bitter bark of a laugh. In that sound, Will recalled Lirette more clearly, and he felt a stab of grief lance through him again.

"I have a heap less to deal with now," Macy said, "Jason quit me. Said he was sorry for taking advantage, because he only came all the way down south because he wanted to get ahold of some of Pa's money. Told me not to be upset, because he didn't want to hurt me. I told him that don't amount to a hill of beans, because I always knew he thought the sun came up just to hear him crow. He never had the good sense God gave a rock, so I just can't figure what made him say something so smart to me."

Macy let out a snort that was more Caroline than Duke, and Will couldn't help but smile.

"Sorry 'bout that, Will," she said, "I don't mean to talk your ear off. I'll get this to you soon, if the creek don't rise. How's your beau? Doing better than mine, I pray."

Will huffed his own laugh. He hadn't expected to get pulled into a whole conversation with her, but he got the sense she needed to talk to someone, and he had called at just the right time. He didn't mind.

"Livin' in high cotton," he said with a grin, "I guess there's not a pot too crooked that a lid won't fit. I bet you never thought you'd see the day I manage to have a beau."

Macy huffed.

“Believe it or not, Will, but I’ve always believed you’d find a way to be happy. Your Hannibal seems like he’s doing a fine job of that so far.”

Will smiled. He would have had a hard time believing her if she were anyone else. Being Lirette’s daughter made it a lot easier for him to believe she was an optimist about him. Maybe this could be a good thing, and he could make a real friend of her, too.

“He sure is. I have to let you go, Macy. I need to pick up my dogs. I’ll talk to you soon.”

That may or may not have been a lie, but he didn’t think there was much risk in it. They were both busy people, and he doubted Macy would notice if he didn’t call again for a while.

“Alright. Have a good day, Will.”

Will got off the phone and let out a long breath. While it had been nice to talk to her, it had also been draining, and he had other things to think about at the moment. He had to go get the dogs.

—

“Will, I’m really sorry. I didn’t mean to say something so insensitive. It was rude, and cruel of me. Everyone deals with grief in their own way, and I shouldn’t have-”

“Stop,” Will said, smiling a bit as the dogs ran around in Alana’s yard. Max was slower than the others, but Winston kept circling back to make sure he wasn’t left behind. “I shouldn’t have gotten angry with you. I knew you didn’t mean any harm by it, and I was wrong to be mad. I hope you can forgive me.”

Alana raised her eyebrows, apparently surprised by Will’s interruption and apology alike. She gave a laugh, light and pleasant.

“Well, I’m glad you’re not angry anymore. I was sure I had just done something unforgivable. I feel like I keep tripping over myself with you, and eventually I’ll do it one time too many. I’m not normally so clumsy.”

Will huffed his own laugh and shook his head.

“I think that’s my fault, actually,” he said, “most people have a hard time knowing how to act with me. There’s just something about the way I work that clashes with the way everyone else works. I knew that, and I should have either warned you ahead of time or kept my own head because I knew. It really wasn’t your fault.”

Alana tipped her head, studying Will. She did it the same way he had seen from too many professionals in her field for his comfort, but he knew she held no malice. She was curious about him, professionally, but she wouldn’t act on her curiosity because they were just friends. She was a good one. Will wondered what would have happened if he had met her before Hannibal.

Probably not much. She wouldn't have been able to help him the way Hannibal did, and she would never allow herself to enter into a relationship with someone she was professionally curious about.

"I can see why Hannibal likes you," Alana said at length, "he's always been a fan of the bizarre. Not that I'm calling you bizarre. It's just that you are definitely unique. You're his kind of thing, I think. And I think he'll be good for you."

Will smiled, more to himself than to her. She didn't realize how right she was. And he thought she was right for calling him bizarre. All things considered.

Chapter End Notes

Smothering Will with new friends, because I just want him to be happy (I am actively making him unhappy), have healthy relationships (I am ruining all of his relationships), and be safe (I am actively making him unsafe).

Up next: Will reads more of the letter from Lirette, and Hannibal starts giving way more red flags.

62

Chapter Summary

Will reads more of the letter. He asks Hannibal a burning question.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

- I hope Macy keeps in touch with you. It'd be a crying shame for you to never talk to each other, just because I'm not there to remind you the other exists. If life takes you two farther apart, I suppose that's how it goes, but I'd like my family to always be together.

You're probably curious why I would leave my gun to you, and you have every right to wonder. I have plenty of family and friends who would want to have it to remember me by, and who you might think it makes more sense to give it to. I want you to know I am fully aware of that, and I stand by my decision. I want you to have it because there's no better person for it. That gun served me well all my years on the force, and I hope it will serve you just as well. You keep it, and keep yourself safe. Protect the life you are building for yourself.

If Max is still around, give him a good pat from me.

My mind is scattered, can you tell? It's been a while since I've wrote an actual letter, so I keep going off in different directions. You're probably used to that from me.

I bet you met some of my pals from the force at my wake. I would give anything to have been there. I'm sure they liked you nearly as much as I do, and I hope you don't think any less of me because of them. I know they can be a bit nosey. I think they excuse it away as an occupational habit, but I think they actually just like to gossip. I hope they didn't make you feel uncomfortable.

If there's ever anything you need, my people are there to help you. Macy, and the precinct. All you have to do is mention my name and they'll help however they can. You don't have to do everything on your own. I know you're used to doing it all yourself, but you don't have to. Someday you'll need help, and I want you to know help is available.

I don't know if you'll really believe that. But I was obliged to try.

I want you to overcome Steve Walters. I know you have a hard time even saying his name, but you need to. You need to remember that you defeated that evil. Close that chapter of your life. You survived him, and I want you to accept that now. I want you to be happy, and I don't think that will ever happen if you can't find a way to get past him. He hurt you, and he keeps hurting you as long as you let him. Don't let him hurt you any more. Do it for me. And do it for yourself.

Did I ever tell you that Caroline didn't know if she wanted kids until after you? She was worried me being an officer would make me jaded, or want to distance myself from family matters. She had seen that happen to too many men. She didn't want to bring a child into the world if I couldn't be there for them, and I respected her in that. I didn't want to leave her with all that concern, and I of course didn't want to be a poor father. But after you started coming by the house, and she saw how famously we got on, she changed her mind. She wanted to have at least one. That's our Macy.

I don't think I'll tell Macy that story when I write for her, but I thought you ought to know. I was as pleased as punch when Care told me she wanted to have a kid because of you. Maybe she saw that I could do alright, or she saw that I at least hadn't made you any worse off. Either way, thank you.-

Will had to stop reading again. He was crying, but he was smiling. It was just like Lirette to think it was Will who had changed Caroline's mind about having kids. Will knew better. He knew it had all been Lirette. Lirette would have found some other unfortunate kid to help, and would have shown her. Caroline would have seen, regardless of Will being involved.

But he was grateful to have been given that opportunity. To be a part of their family, even in such a small way, and for a short time. To have been given that taste of a normal life, however brief and bittersweet.

Now, like Lirette said, it was up to him to make a life for himself. He couldn't lean on Lirette and the foundation of family he had created for Will. Will had to make something for himself. And he already had a start with Hannibal.

Will called Max over and watched with a sad smile as the dog heaved himself off his bed and trudged over, his tail giving a few slow wags. Max was getting old, but Will thought they still had a few years to spend together. Max's muzzle was greying and Will saw how gingerly he moved, but he didn't seem to actively be in pain. Will would help him when he was.

Max set his head in Will's lap, and Will stroked his ears.

"Lirette says hi," Will said softly, watching as Max's tail gave another wag, "he liked you the most. I bet he secretly always wanted to have dogs. Too bad Macy's scared to death of them."

It was strange that Macy had a fear of dogs, considering her parents. But it had always been there. She had been afraid since she was born, from what Lirette said. Nothing he did could make her like them. So they had never had a dog after she came along. He had always been happy to hear about Will's dogs. Possibly because of that.

Will pulled out his file for the Ripper case. He needed to get back to work on it, and he needed to get back into the mind of the killer. Until the book and casefile from Lirette arrived, he would have to work with what he had here.

The boy, Foltz, had been awarded that trophy as a sort of joke. It had been in recognition of his "stellar performance" by getting those pictures he shouldn't have had. There had been an

unofficial ceremony, and a party for him. Because those pictures had made them a lot of money. Will guessed Freddie Lounds had been one of the people eager to pay up to use them in her speculative article about the strange agent working with the FBI and his unorthodox psychiatrist.

Will wasn't even upset about the pictures anymore. He didn't really care if people saw him and Hannibal like that. It had been crass of them to make such a celebration of intruding into Will and Hannibal's privacy, but they had been in a public place, and they had done nothing to be ashamed of. Will thought maybe they had seemed more intimate than mere friends, but really, he had no frame of reference to know for sure. And in any case, it wasn't anyone's business.

The Ripper had been plenty offended for the both of them, though. Perhaps the Ripper had felt his territory was being trespassed upon by the boy and the paper he worked for. If the Ripper felt Will belonged to him, in whatever capacity he may, this could have been a simple act of territoriality. Staking his claim.

Will hummed in pleasure at the thought, then stopped himself.

The Ripper was dangerous. He was a killer that had made it clear he had nothing wrong with killing someone who barely insulted Will. It should not have been amusing or satisfying to think he was possessive of Will. To think he would kill anyone willing to touch or claim Will in any way.

He should have been even more worried for Hannibal, in that case. Especially because they had just gone on a trip together. *Together* together. Will had gone out of state with Hannibal. Far away, out of the Ripper's reach. Where he couldn't watch. With Hannibal. That could put Hannibal in more danger than ever before. That could have made the Ripper angry.

Maybe it would entice him out of hiding. He wouldn't want to hurt Will, so maybe he would make himself known without hurting Hannibal either. Maybe he would contact Will to finally stake his claim in person.

Again, that shouldn't have excited Will. It should have made him run to Jack, or even Hannibal himself, for protection. For advice on how to go forward with the investigation.

But he wouldn't do either of those things. Will was making himself live bait, and he wouldn't let anyone get in his way. He wanted to know who it was. Who the Ripper was, and why he had fixated on Will. He wanted to hear the words from the Ripper's mouth, and understand how they had ever crossed paths in this way. Will wanted to know the Ripper.

He doubted he would turn him in, at this point. Unless he had to in order to protect Hannibal.

Will could imagine it, the Ripper meeting Will finally, and threatening Hannibal's safety. Will would not hesitate to send the monster to prison, in that case. He wouldn't kill the Ripper. Of course not. He couldn't imagine doing that. Not after he had found a way to feel so powerful and strong because of the man. But he would lock him up. Put him in a cage.

Where Will could always find him.

But only if he threatened Hannibal. If the Ripper could be satisfied to let Will have Hannibal, there would be no reason to do anything like that. There would be no reason either of them would have to do anything they couldn't take back.

Will wanted to find out what would happen. For once in his life, he felt thrilled by not being able to predict the outcome of a situation. Rather than feel frightened, as he so often did when dealing with others, the Ripper made Will want more. Want to learn more, regardless of the consequences.

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"How did it feel?" Will asked, running his fingers through Hannibal's hair as the other man dozed with his head in Will's lap, "To kill Tobias Budge?"

Hannibal opened his eyes, staring up at Will with wonder. His eyes darkened with the memory of that day, when he had believed for a time that Will had been killed. His eyes always darkened that way when he thought about it, and Will had gotten used to recognizing the expression.

"Believing he had hurt you, even killed you," Hannibal said softly, "I felt nothing but vicious victory in his death. He deserved to die, and I wished I could have made him suffer more, because I felt so hurt."

Will smiled, relieved to hear Hannibal had felt good about it. He had worried Hannibal felt guilty, or ugly for killing. After everything, having confessed his own feelings on the matter to Hannibal, Will wasn't sure he would have been able to stand it if Hannibal didn't feel at least something similar.

"Good," Will said softly, "he did deserve to die. For hurting you."

Hannibal smiled. His eyes sparked with red in a way Will found more and more fascinating.

"Will Graham, you are dangerous. I adore you so."

Will huffed, unsure how he was supposed to respond to that.

"If he had gotten away after hurting you, I would have killed him myself," Will said, and he felt sure it was true. He had killed one person for Hannibal already, and he knew he would do it again. Even if it was the Ripper. If the Ripper dared to hurt Hannibal, Will would hunt him down.

Hannibal sat up and pulled Will into a kiss. Will kept his hands in Hannibal's hair, always amazed by how many sensations he was allowed to experience with Hannibal now. He never wanted to stop touching Hannibal, never wanted to be apart from him.

"Will, you have been absorbed in the Ripper case since we returned from Louisiana. Are you afraid for me again? Do you think he means you harm?"

Will sighed. He had noticed that he had been thinking about the Ripper a lot more recently, and it would have been silly to think Hannibal hadn't. Hannibal always noticed. But Will

didn’t know if it would be right to tell Hannibal how he felt about the case. If nothing else, it could make Hannibal worry about him, which could complicate things.

“I’m not afraid of him,” Will said, which was mostly true, “he won’t hurt me, and if I’m right then he wouldn’t dare hurt you either. If only because that would hurt me. If he knows me as well as he thinks he does, he would know that I wouldn’t take it well if he hurt you.”

Hannibal studied Will carefully, as if he knew there was so much more that he wasn’t saying. Will thought he probably did know Will wasn’t saying everything, but if Hannibal wanted to know something he would ask.

“You trust him,” Hannibal noted, “a man who everyone calls a monster, yet you do not have a drop of doubt. You understand him so entirely.”

Will shrugged, combing his fingers through Hannibal’s hair distractedly. He felt strangely about the Ripper. He knew it was an unhealthy, unorthodox kind of relationship. He didn’t even know who the Ripper was, but he felt like he knew him well.

“I do. Please don’t tell Jack. I know he would take me off the case. I need to find the Ripper, Hannibal. I need to know who he is.”

Hannibal hummed curiously. He was still studying Will, as if trying to make a serious decision and something in Will’s eyes would give him the answer. Will began to worry Hannibal was second guessing their relationship. Because Will clearly wasn’t mentally well.

“If the Ripper makes you feel so bold, gives you the power to be yourself as you are growing to be, then I could not deny you, Will,” Hannibal said at length, “I wish you luck in the endeavor.”

Will grinned.

Chapter End Notes

red flags flapping in the wind Ah, well, Will doesn't know what's normal, so he doesn't realize just how weird this is. He's more worried Hannibal will think he's the crazy one, and he's not noticing what's going on right in front of him.

Up next: Will does some digging into the past, and Hannibal asks him for a date.

63

Chapter Summary

Will does some reading that gives him a new burst of confidence.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Studying the file from his childhood might have been something Will should have done when with Hannibal. It would make sense, to have a source of comfort so nearby when exposing his own hurt in a way that could leave him raw as an exposed nerve. But Will needed to keep some things to himself. He hadn't even told Hannibal he had asked for Macy to send it. He hadn't told him when he had received the package with the book in it. He hadn't told Hannibal anything about this.

Will wanted to catch the Ripper, in one way or the other, but he didn't want anyone else to even be close. He wanted to keep the Ripper for himself, until the moment he had to decide what to do about them. He couldn't even let Hannibal see how close he was, because Hannibal could try to stop him, or help him. Will didn't want either of those things to happen. He needed to do this entirely on his own, to keep Hannibal safe and to keep himself from doing something he would regret. He didn't want to take advantage of Hannibal.

So Will was looking at the man who had hurt him all those years ago once more. But not in the way he saw him in dreams. Will was looking at Steve Walters the way he had been the last time Will had seen him in person. The way Will had left him in that basement.

Will's memories of the final altercation were blurred, everything happening so fast he didn't see all of it. But these pictures were still, and the report of what they found was definitive.

Steve Walters lay in a pool of his own blood, bits of Will's flesh under his fingernails. His eyes had been scratched out by Will's jagged, uncut fingernails, and his wrist had been broken with the force of Will's rage. Will had killed him without mercy, had reveled in the pain the man felt as he died. Will had killed him in order to survive, but also because he deserved to die.

The Steve Walters in the pictures was different from the one in Will's memory. He looked smaller, more pathetic. He looked like the poor excuse for a man Lirette had always claimed him to be. Will could see the strong arms from manual labor, and the beer belly from his poor life choices. He looked like any other man you might see on the street, the kind you wouldn't necessarily want to enter into a conversation with, but wouldn't always cross the street just to avoid. The kind of man who raised red flags, but no blaring alarms.

It was good, to see him that way. Dead by Will's own hands, never to make anyone suffer again.

Lirette had been right. It was a good idea for Will to look at these.

Maybe it wouldn't have been the same before, even just a few months before now. Seeing the man's face, even without his eyes, would probably have sent him into a panic attack. Before Hannibal, before Hobbs, before everything. Will was different now, and he could feel it like a soft thrum in the back of his head. Something large and dangerous, constantly purring.

Will read through everything, constantly glancing back at the pictures. He found out everything he had never wanted to know about Steve Walters. How many kids he killed before nabbing Will, how long he kept them, what he made each of them do. Things Will had known but never been told. Things Will had tried to forget.

All things that made him feel better for having ripped those eyes from Steve's skull all those years ago.

Will didn't know why he suddenly felt this way. He didn't know why it was happening all at once. He had felt afraid for so long, and now he was just angry. Angry, and powerful. The way Hannibal had always encouraged him to feel about this stuff. Allowing his anger to give him courage rather than strangle him.

If the Ripper had access to this, he knew a lot about Will. But not everything.

There was no way for the Ripper to know about little bird. He had no way of knowing that was what Will had been called for nearly two years in place of his name, that Will still heard those words in his nightmares, as rare as they had become recently. He couldn't know that still the imagery of a bird made Will nervous, and it was how he thought of his rapidly beating heart when he was afraid.

He must have done it by accident, the wings in Foltz's scene. He couldn't have known how it would affect Will, so he must have done it without meaning anything more by it than what was obvious. It was a wild coincidence, but Will had to accept it as the truth. It was the answer that required the fewest jumps.

Will was anxious for the next Ripper scene, mostly from his own curiosity. He wanted to see what the Ripper wanted to say to him. There had to be something more, or else he never would have made that scene to get his attention. The Ripper had Will's full, nearly undivided attention. Will wanted to see what he would do with it.

Will's phone rang, pulling Will from his deeply unhealthy but strangely pleasant thoughts.

"Will Graham."

"Hello, Will," Hannibal said, a clear smile in his voice, "I was wondering if you were available for dinner tonight."

Will twirled his pen in his fingers and glanced at the clock. His heart sped up a bit as he had an idea. He was feeling bold, and he wanted to make something of his life despite Steve Walters.

“Will you come over to mine?” he asked, feeling his face heat a bit at the way it sounded. So normal. “I’d like it if you came over here tonight.”

Hannibal was silent for a moment, and Will held his breath. Even after that first time, it was still new to both of them for Will to want Hannibal inside his home. Will was thrilled by his new confidence with such things, but it still made him nervous.

“If you would like that, I would be more than pleased to come over. Shall I bring something to cook, or will you be providing our meal tonight?”

Will grinned, his heart thumping excitedly in his chest. He was finally getting a normal life, at least some of the time. He just had to keep it separate from the rest of it. He had to keep it safe from Steve Walters, and the Ripper. He had to protect this part of his new life.

“You can bring something if you like,” he said, “I don’t feel all that hungry, but I’m starved for your company.”

Hannibal laughed softly.

“You grow bolder by the day, Will Graham. It is always a pleasant surprise to learn who I am dealing with each morning. What have you eaten today?”

Will clicked his tongue and glanced guiltily into the kitchen. Not much. That was the answer to that question. He thought he could remember eating an apple that morning, on his walk with the dogs. He had definitely had a few cups of coffee while reading through files. Other than that, he didn’t think he’d eaten anything. Hannibal would know it the moment he arrived. He would be able to smell it on Will. So there was no point in lying.

“Not much,” he admitted, “I’ve been busy. Jack wants me back on cases like nothing’s happened, and I’ve got a lot of catching up to do. I need to be ready for the next scene.”

Hannibal hummed in evident displeasure, and Will did feel a bit ashamed for having neglected his own health all day. But he knew Hannibal would remedy that. Hannibal wanted to take care of him.

“Then I shall have to bring something,” Hannibal said, “is there anything in particular you are in the mood for, or are you leaving all of it up to me?”

Will grinned.

“Bring whatever you want, darling. I trust you.”

Hannibal was smiling again when he replied.

“I shall see you soon, in that case. You are not working yourself too hard, are you? Jack cannot demand everything you have to give. You deserve rest, Will.”

Will shook his head, heaving himself up out of his chair to look out the window. The leaves on the trees were turning, and there were already some scattered on the ground. He really needed to chop some firewood before the winter set in for the year. The weather was erratic, and he knew it would start snowing any time, regardless of whether or not they'd been given a proper autumn.

"Work myself too hard, when I have you? Perish the thought. You would be disappointed, and how could I live with that? I'm doing just fine, aside from forgetting to eat, and that's nothing you can't fix. I'm finally learning to demand some balance in my life, thanks to you, so don't you worry about it. You're taking it easy, too, right? After what you've been through, you ought to still be on leave in my books."

Hannibal hummed thoughtfully.

"I am perfectly alright. My ailments are entirely physical, and I had an excellent doctor to take care of my wounds. I also tend to heal very quickly."

Will huffed. Entirely physical. That was a laugh. Will could see the way Hannibal had to keep reminding himself Will was there, as if thinking Tobias might have actually killed him. Will knew he was having a hard time with how shaken the fight had left him. Hannibal was lying to himself about it, and Will supposed he had every right to. It would be hypocritical of Will to say he didn't.

"Alright. See you soon. I've got a little tidying up to do before you get here."

"Very well, vilkas. Take care."

Will set his phone down on the desk and stretched. He felt the way his muscles protested at the movement after being stationary for so long. It would do him some good to exercise before Hannibal came. And the endorphins wouldn't do any harm either, nor would the fresh air.

Will pulled on his boots and whistled for the dogs, heading out to the barn to get his splitting ax.

Chapter End Notes

A little catharsis through reflection for Will in this chapter. Because sometimes it's better to forget, but sometimes learning the truth can be validating.

Up next: A little progress with physical intimacy, and Will realizes something Hannibal is struggling with.

64

Chapter Summary

A little more self-indulgent fun

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will had taken his shirt off, exposing his sweating shoulders and chest to the chilly autumn air. The contrast in temperatures was grounding in a way a lot of things failed to be these days. Will was almost always entirely in his head recently, and it was good to be out of it for once. His breath came in white puffs in front of his face, and he grinned at the sight.

He had a good sized pile of wood by the time Hannibal pulled up, and he would be satisfied to stop for the day. Winters didn't usually last long in these parts, so he should have enough.

Will waved as Hannibal stepped from his car, pulling his shirt from where he had left it hanging from his back pocket. He didn't pull it on, though, deciding instead to use it to wipe the sweat from his face. He would have to take a shower and put on fresh clothes anyways, so it wouldn't do any good to put it on again. He pulled his gloves off and ran a hand through his hair, imagining it was a wild mess at this point. The dogs all ran off to greet Hannibal, likely swarming him and getting fur on his nice clothes. Max lagged behind, but his tail was wagging and he didn't seem to be in any pain.

Will was well and truly hungry now, which was good. Hannibal was going to make him dinner.

Hannibal's steps came up while Will's back was turned, stacking the wood more neatly. Will smiled as he straightened up.

"I know I'm a whole mess right now, but I'll take a shower while you get started on dinner, and-"

Will stopped when Hannibal's arms caught him, holding him in place as Hannibal brought his face close to Will's neck. Hannibal inhaled deeply, and Will almost laughed aloud. He couldn't imagine he smelled very nice at the moment, but Hannibal hummed in pleasure.

"You are a vision, Will Graham," Hannibal said, "You are entirely unaware how much of a temptation you are."

Will huffed, setting his hands over Hannibal's on his bare stomach, belatedly realizing this was the most bare skin he had shown in the other man's presence to this point. He wasn't

uncomfortable, so he didn't pull away. It was a surprise to him that he was comfortable with this, but he would take what he could get. It was progress.

"I'm sure there are plenty of people who would beg to differ, but I'll thank you anyhow. I didn't realize this would be such a draw to you, but I guess I'm glad you're not grossed out by my sweat."

Hannibal hummed, and Will felt his tongue flick out to swipe just over his carotid artery. The sensation startled Will and he jumped, but then he laughed.

"Alright, let's get inside before I catch a chill. I've got too many people who would get on my case if I got sick right now."

Hannibal made a soft sound of objection to having to pull away from Will, but he released him from the embrace. Will turned to Hannibal with a grin, finding him in an overcoat in addition to his usual suit. It was a bit excessive for autumn temperatures, but Will didn't think too much about it for the moment.

"Eating properly would also benefit you in your endeavor to stave off illness," Hannibal pointed out as they began their walk to the house.

Will grinned and shook his head.

"Yeah, well, I guess that's your job then," he said, "since I can't for the life of me seem to feed myself. But I know you take that responsibility gladly, right?"

Hannibal took Will's hand in his own, his fingers cold in comparison to Will's skin, warmed by recent exertion. There was a very slight tremble in Hannibal's fingers, and Will wondered if maybe he was starting to get sick, getting chilled easily.

"Is that because I am a control freak?" Hannibal asked, "You believe I enjoy controlling what you eat?"

Will laughed.

"Maybe," he said, "but I don't mind. And I don't think that's all of it. I think you like to feed the people you care about. You don't want them to go hungry, and as long as you have a say in it, they won't."

Hannibal absorbed those words in silence, and Will wondered about him a bit. His mood was slightly different today, though not in any way that was easy to pinpoint. Will could just feel there was something different about him.

They reached the door and Will whistled again, holding the door open for each of the dogs. He noticed Max was limping a bit, and made a note to check him for injuries later.

Once inside, Will pulled out some fresh clothes and headed to the shower, noting that Hannibal was headed back out to his car to retrieve whatever ingredients he had brought.

Under the warm spray of water, Will thought again about Hannibal's strange behavior. It really wasn't enough that he could ask Hannibal why he was acting strangely, even. Hannibal himself might not even realize anything was the matter. But something was.

Just as Will reached to shut off the water, feeling sufficiently clean, it clicked.

The cold. Hannibal had begun his tale of trauma by telling Will how bitterly cold it had been that winter in Lithuania. The year his entire family had died.

It was the change of the season. That was all. Hannibal was reacting to the cold, because of his trauma. He might not even realize it. In the same fashion he fed those he cared about because they had been hungry when Mischa died, he would react to cold with anxiety. The colder it got, the worse it would get, probably.

Will wondered if there was anything he could do.

Will emerged from the shower, a towel around his shoulders as he entered the kitchen. Hannibal was cooking away, his coat and jacket discarded for the time being as he was enveloped in the warmth of the stove. He looked entirely at ease, at least on the surface. Will could see the underlying tension in his muscles, as if anticipating something bad happening.

Hannibal looked up and smiled at Will, making Will smile reactively back. As strange as the domesticity was, Will was too distracted to allow that to really settle over him.

"I thought I would make something hearty and filling," Hannibal said pleasantly, evidently either unaware or ignoring his own precarious mental state, "Beef wellington. It may not seem as complex as some of the other meals we have shared, but I don't expect you will be disappointed."

Will nodded and turned to the fireplace, suddenly aware that a chill could begin creeping in at any moment.

"I'll just get a fire going and I'll be right in to watch you work your magic," he said, feeling responsible for making sure Hannibal felt safe here. Hannibal had made his home safe for Will, and continued to make everything alright wherever he went. Will had to be able to at least do this for him in return.

Hannibal had to feel safe here.

Will got a fire started and fed it to get it hot. He hoped it would be enough to stave off the chill, along with any bad memories that might be lurking in Hannibal's mind and trying to find a way into his awareness. If Hannibal wasn't even aware of how he was reacting to the weather, Will didn't know what it would take for him to really feel safe. He just hoped he would be able to provide it.

Will smiled to himself a bit once the fire was going, realizing that for possibly the first time since he had been taken as a kid, he was in the position where he could offer safety and support to someone instead of the other way around. He had been broken for so long it was strange to feel like he could put someone else back together.

And he wanted to help Hannibal in any way he could. If he could do anything for Hannibal, to make him feel happy and safe, Will would do it. He was strong enough to be a support for someone else now.

Maybe Will sat in front of the fire, overthinking everything, for longer than he realized. Hannibal stepped into the doorway and tipped his head curiously at him. He had come looking for Will.

“Are you lost in thought, Will?” he asked with a fond smile, “I confess I selfishly wish you to stay with me here.”

Will shook his head, smiling as he stood up to meet Hannibal. He kissed Hannibal softly and pulled him back into the kitchen, now filling with the wonderful scents of Hannibal’s cooking.

“Not lost. Only wandering for a moment. I’m here. I wouldn’t want to go anywhere else.”

Hannibal smiled at the reassurance, and Will thought he was more relieved than he wanted to show. There was definitely some tension and anxiety under his composed appearance, and Will wondered if Hannibal would let the walls down sometime soon, allowing Will to share in his worries.

Will would wait. Hannibal was always patient with Will, waiting for him to open up and share more of himself. Will could return the favor, especially after everything Hannibal had done for him. For today, Will would just be here for Hannibal, whether Hannibal allowed himself to realize he needed it or not. Will could be what Hannibal needed today.

“I have been curious about something, and perhaps now is not the best time to ask, but I cannot imagine I will find a more suitable moment,” Hannibal said.

Will raised his eyebrows, instantly curious what Hannibal would want to ask. He sat at the table to watch Hannibal work, folding his hands in front of him.

“Fire away,” he said.

Hannibal tipped his head toward the front of the house.

“Why is it you sleep in the main room of the house?” he asked, “you have an entire second floor that I have not seen, but there must be a bedroom.”

Will blinked, then huffed a laugh.

“Yeah, okay, you got me. I don’t even really use the second floor, other than for storage. I’ve got a couple reasons for it. The one I’ve always had on hand, in case anyone asked, is the dogs. Some of them are old, or their legs are short, or both. They can’t all do stairs. I don’t want to be unavailable to them. Max, specifically, is getting too old for the stairs.”

Hannibal looked at Will with such warmth, then, that he almost considered leaving it at that. It was what he had always planned to do if anyone asked. He could leave it there, and Hannibal would respect his decision not to talk about it.

But it was different exactly because it was Hannibal. Hannibal was the one who could see everything. He understood what Will told him, on a deeper level than anyone else who had ever tried. Hannibal had been actively helping Will to overcome his past since the moment they met, and Will still found it hard to believe Hannibal could really love him. If Will couldn't bring himself to tell Hannibal something like this, how could he expect to face it on his own, and overcome what had happened? He had started this journey, and he needed to keep going.

"I was taken from my bedroom," Will added, looking down at his hands, "by Steve Walters. I guess I have a hard time with that. I don't really want to sleep in a bedroom again. At least not alone. It's too small, enclosed. It feels like there are fewer places to run. In the living room, I have the front door, the hall, the kitchen. Hell, if I had to, I could jump out a window. In the bedroom upstairs, I feel trapped. The closed door is an obstacle, and the window just leads to the roof. I wouldn't be able to sleep there. I'd feel like a fish in a barrel."

Hannibal considered it in silence as he worked. He didn't appear pitying, which Will was ever grateful for, but rather pensive. As always after Will offered a piece of himself, Hannibal seemed to hold it gently, wary of being careless with something as rare as Will's vulnerability. Will appreciated Hannibal's care more than he could express, and every time it was shown so clearly he was reminded how rare it was to find someone who knew how to do so.

Will wanted to be that for Hannibal. He hoped he would be able to manage it, as unpracticed as he was in all areas of human interaction.

"Do you believe this exacerbated your reaction when you stayed at my home the first time?" Hannibal asked, "the fact that you were in a bedroom, and on the second floor as well."

Will blinked. He hadn't thought of that, but he supposed it very well may have. He hadn't been consciously aware of it at the time, as tired and stressed as he had been, but it was certainly a possibility.

"Maybe," he replied thoughtfully, "but that's not your fault of course. You didn't know, and I didn't think about it."

Hannibal nodded.

"You have not had such a reaction since, though you have stayed in my home twice more," he said, "From what you have said, I can only gather it must have been my presence keeping the demons at bay, as the rest of the atmosphere was much the same. If that is true, I confess I feel pride in that, however unearned."

Will grinned.

"Alright, yeah," he agreed, "you're my knight in shining armor, keeping the nightmares away. But I wouldn't say it's unearned. From what I can tell, you've been working really hard to be my safe person since basically the day we met. Even if that was just because you were charmed by my pretty smile, I'd say that's an accomplishment."

Hannibal ducked his head in acknowledgement, and Will huffed a laugh. Then, he remembered something he had noticed a while back, but hadn't thought of again until now.

"You thought I might need to use the guest room," he said, making Hannibal turn to him in question, "Maybe you didn't know when, but you thought I might at some point. You changed it to make me more comfortable. I noticed when I was in there. The colors. They matched the changes you made to the dining room, but not the rest of your house. You fixed up the guest room in case I ever needed it."

There was a light dusting of pink high on Hannibal's cheeks, and Will was amazed by it. It was rare to get a blush from Hannibal, and there it was.

"I did not want you to be uncomfortable," Hannibal said softly, "I thought it a possibility, and I would have felt my heart break if you could not feel comfortable in my home because I had not thought to accommodate you."

Will stood and kissed Hannibal, unable to leave him there by himself for another moment. Hannibal was more than perfect, and Will wouldn't let him think anything else.

"You're a doll, you know," Will said, "everything you do makes me feel like I ought to try harder, because you always seem to know what to do and never ask me to thank you or repay you."

Hannibal smiled.

"I have nearly everything I could want," he said, "I would not ask anything more of you."

Chapter End Notes

I like the headcanon that Hannibal has a hard time with cold weather, because of his own trauma. It felt appropriate for this fic.

Up next: Will keeps up being impulsive, and his mind tries to tell him something.

65

Chapter Summary

~Life could be dream~

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will and Hannibal sat together, cozy in Will's bed as the fire crackled. Will was beginning to doze, his belly full of Hannibal's food and his senses full of Hannibal.

There was still anxiety in Hannibal, an unusual hesitance in his actions and a tremble in his fingers. Will could feel the tension in his muscles even now, and he wished he knew what to do to help more than what he was already doing. He wanted to help, but wasn't sure there was anything he could do.

"Would you like to stay the night?" Will asked on impulse.

Hannibal's breath hitched, then a bit of tension left his shoulders. He pressed his face into the side of Will's neck and inhaled deeply.

"I would very much like that," Hannibal said, and there was a note of relief in his tone, "so long as you are comfortable with it. I do not want to overstay my welcome."

Will smiled and leaned into Hannibal more. He thought he understood. Hannibal was afraid something would happen to Will, all alone out here in the cold. He was afraid something would happen and he would be unable to protect Will.

"You're always welcome here," Will said, "I'll let you know if you're ever not."

Hannibal nodded gently, his hair catching slightly in Will's stubble. Will could feel him relaxing by margins as he understood he would be allowed to watch over Will for at least tonight.

"You won't mind the dogs being here?" Will asked, thinking back to what Beverly had said about the fur on his clothes.

Hannibal lifted his head and smiled.

"They are your family, Will," he said, "they are important to you, so they are important to me. Despite the fact that I do not have pets of my own, I do enjoy the company of animals."

Will grinned. He was glad to hear it. The way Hannibal said it, it seemed like he wasn't just tolerating them on Will's behalf. That was a relief.

Will was glad Hannibal was starting to feel better, even if he didn't realize he had been feeling poorly in the first place.

"Beverly says she knows I'm a good person because of all the dog fur on my clothes, and the fact that you tolerate me," he told Hannibal, earning a laugh.

"Miss Katz is quite perceptive," he said, "though many would take your profession as a sign of your nature. You have set out to save and protect the innocent."

Will huffed.

"Plenty of bad people go into law enforcement," he pointed out, "I bet Beverly knows that as well as anyone. She knows better than to judge someone based off that."

Hannibal pulled Will tighter against him, nuzzling into his shoulder.

"I'm flattered she considers me such a good judge of character that I am even part of the equation," he said, "though I feel as if she is comparing me to a canine."

Will laughed.

"That's a compliment in my book," he teased, "I like dogs better than most people."

Hannibal hummed in agreement.

"Whatever it takes to earn your affection, I will gladly accept."

Will shook his head, grinning. Despite everything, Hannibal acted like he was the lucky one. Will appreciated that, even though it was just untrue. Will was the lucky one, for even having Hannibal in his life.

"How goes the Ripper case?" Hannibal asked casually.

Will frowned, knowing there was no reason for Hannibal to avoid the topic, but wanting to avoid it regardless. He needed to separate this part of his life from that part, or else he might get his wires crossed and actually go crazy. He needed to start now, or else he might reach the point of no return. He had already mixed everything up enough.

"Let's not talk about that," Will said, "I'm trying to compartmentalize. Keep this part of my life, the safe part, separate from work. Work is dangerous, and I've already had a few incidents because of the blur between. I'm trying to keep this part of my life safe."

Hannibal was silent for a long moment, thoughtful as he traced his fingers over Will's ribs. Will wondered if Hannibal was upset. It wouldn't make sense for him to be upset about this. It was a healthy thing Will was trying to do, and it wasn't as if it had anything to do with Hannibal. It was going to help Will protect Hannibal and their relationship.

“Would you talk about it with me while we are at work?” Hannibal asked, “I am technically still a consultant, and we work together. Would that be blurring the lines?”

Will huffed a laugh.

“When we’re at work, I’ll tell you all about it,” he said, “but when we’re here, or at your house, I would prefer we didn’t.”

Hannibal nodded, pressing a kiss to Will’s neck.

“I can accept that,” he said.

Will smiled.

—

Enormous wings thumped, creating gusts of air that combed through Will’s hair like strong fingers. The shadow of the flying creature blocked out the light of the moon, blinding Will and leaving him lost in the woods.

Will didn’t know what the creature was, and he couldn’t see it to try to figure it out.

“You don’t have to see. You already know.”

It was a voice, but not in the sense that Will was hearing it with his ears. It was as if he was reading it, the words clanging into his head as full concepts of meaning. Thoughts that did not originate in his own mind. It felt familiar, though, as if he recognized the mind of the other.

“You’re the Ripper,” Will said aloud, looking up as the winged creature began to descend, sending dry leaves scattering around Will’s feet, “this must be a dream.”

The creature landed before Will, shaking the ground with a thud. Will could see his surroundings, but the Ripper was made of shadow, a shape formed from the very dark. Only the wings were defined, spanning nearly across the world in his mind.

“What is a dream, but your mind crying out for you to recognize the truth?” the Ripper asked, their voice like the wind through the trees.

Will reached out, but the Ripper was all at once behind him, without moving. He turned, but there was no one there.

His back ached and he bent forward, his eyes widening in shock as he watched his own shadow grow wings. Blood poured from the torn flesh they sprouted from, dripping black onto the leaves at his feet.

Without a thought or command from Will, the wings pumped and he launched into the sky, the air being ripped from his lungs. He laughed and turned his face to the moon, basking in the light and the feeling of being free.

He was underwater, his lungs crying out for air. It was cold. Freezing. And he didn't know which direction was up. He struggled, but without knowing which way to go. He was trapped. Dying. He couldn't breathe.

Will slammed into what felt like a wall. He realized it was the frozen surface of a lake. He had fallen through the ice, and was trapped. He would die under here, drowning and freezing at the same time. He couldn't get out, and he couldn't breathe.

A hand grabbed Will's wrist and all at once he was in Hannibal's house, in the study. A fire was crackling in the fireplace, and he was dry. Hannibal was smiling at him warmly, and everything seemed alright.

Will kissed Hannibal, air finally entering his lungs as Hannibal breathed out words Will didn't know. They tasted like apples and honey, and Hannibal was warm and real against Will.

Will looked at Hannibal, watching as his skin began to darken and his hair turned to feathers. The light of the fire flickered and licked at them both, and Will was enchanted by the sight of Hannibal being consumed by shadow.

"Do you imagine what it would feel like to have your own lungs removed? Your own chest emptied and left hollow?"

As the words rang through Will's head, Hannibal's hands, now dark with shadows, plunged into Will's chest, reaching up under his ribs to grasp at his lungs. Blood poured out, covering Will in more darkness. Wherever the blood landed on Hannibal's dark skin, it was absorbed as if Hannibal was drinking it through touch.

"Yes," Will breathed, leaning forward again and kissing Hannibal deeply. He put his hands into Hannibal's feathery hair as he felt Hannibal's hands roaming around inside his chest.

Chapter End Notes

Will's brain: *crying* "why can't you see what's literally right in front of you?"
Will: *blissfully ignorant* "I'm pretty sure I'm blind. Or there's nothing to see anyway. You know what? I'll close my eyes."
XD

Up next: Will starts taking what's his, and planning his future. Things are going well for him.

66

Chapter Summary

Bet you weren't expecting this! [Will reacts to the dream from last chapter]

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will woke up, gasping a bit but for once not struggling to breathe. He felt warm all over, and entirely too full of energy.

Hannibal shifted beside him, letting out a soft stream of mumbled words. Will turned to look at him, and Hannibal sat up, pushing his hair out of his face and reaching for Will in the dark.

Will moved quickly, more quickly than he had realized he was capable, and was straddling Hannibal's hips in an instant. He gripped Hannibal's shoulders and pulled him into a kiss, wanting to be impossibly close until there was nothing separating them. Until their skin and sinew knitted together and the same blood pumped through both of their bodies.

"Will," Hannibal gasped when they pulled apart for breath, "I had a dream about you."

Will huffed a laugh, leaning forward and kissing Hannibal's neck the way Hannibal always seemed to want to do to Will.

"I had a dream about *you* ," he replied.

Hannibal hummed, but there was a bit of tension in his shoulders. Will realized Hannibal's dream had been dangerous. It had probably involved something bad happening to Will, in the cold.

"Hey," Will said, sliding his hands down and over Hannibal's bare chest, eliciting a shiver from the other man, "stay with me, right here, right now."

Hannibal gripped Will's hips, meeting Will's eyes in the dark with an expression of confused wonder.

"Where else would I go?" he asked, smiling softly.

Will grinned.

"You had better not go anywhere. I have plenty for you to do right here."

Hannibal's breath hitched, and his grip tightened. Will was getting desperate for him, for them to be closer until the boundaries were all blurred.

"Will, if you go on like this, we may do something you are not ready for."

Will shook his head and kissed Hannibal again.

"I'm ready. I swear I'm ready. You want this too, right?"

Hannibal wet his lips, clearly just a step away from giving in.

"You will tell me if we must stop," Hannibal said, and it was not a question.

Will nodded.

"Please, Hannibal. I want to. I want *you* ."

Hannibal didn't ask any more questions, just helping Will to take off his shirt and beginning to pepper kisses over his bare shoulders.

—

Will felt good. He felt better than he could ever remember feeling. It had been such a huge relief, a liberation, to find out Steve Walters hadn't permanently taken this from him. He felt as if he had reclaimed his own body, his own soul. He didn't belong to Steve Walters anymore. He never really had. He was no longer chained to that basement.

He was free. With Hannibal.

"What was your dream like, that it spurred you on in such a manner?" Hannibal asked curiously, carding his fingers through Will's hair as the sun slowly rose outside.

Will smiled. He could still feel the tracks of dried tears on his face, having been shed in his genuine bliss. Hannibal had made it easy, and good for him.

"First, it was about the Ripper. I was trying to figure out something. But he kept standing just out of reach. Then, I was dying, but you pulled me out. You were there to save me, and you were there to set me free. I felt like I didn't have to be afraid anymore."

Hannibal smiled and pressed a kiss to Will's temple, humming pleasantly.

"I should make breakfast," he said softly, not making any move to do so.

It couldn't last, this easy morning. They both had to go to work. Will was probably already going to make Hannibal be late. He didn't know how early Hannibal was usually at the office. Will would be late if they stayed in bed much longer.

"If I didn't have a lot of work to do, I would suggest we both just stay here for the day," Will mumbled, closing his eyes and turning to press his face to Hannibal's shoulder, "but I guess you have work to do too, and we really just got back from a break."

Hannibal huffed.

“I would like nothing more than to stay here with you, but you are right. We both have responsibilities. I dread to think what Jack may do to us both if you did not go to work today.”

Will grinned.

“Jack gave us his stamp of approval. Did you know? That first day. He told me not to let it get in the way of the job.”

Hannibal chuckled.

“I imagine he would approve anything if he thinks it will benefit his hunt for monsters,” he said, “Jack has a very strong sense of moral obligation, and almost anything that serves his cause is justifiable.”

Will shrugged as well as he could from his position.

“Jack’s trying to do what’s right. He sometimes has to make compromises, but he’s always trying to do the right thing. He’s not biased like you are, always trying to do what’s best for me.”

Hannibal huffed another laugh and sat up, rolling out of the bed.

“Perhaps I should invite him to my dinner party,” he mused, pulling on some clothes, “to thank him for his blessing.”

Will rolled his eyes, but sat up now that he was alone in the bed. He needed to take the dogs out. They had been good all night, even considering the activities going on. They deserved a reward, and Will would have to start with a morning run.

“Do whatever you want,” Will said, “I need to take out the dogs.”

He pulled some clothes from his drawers and pulled them on, watching as the dogs followed Hannibal around and into the kitchen.

Before he went out, he started the fire back up, hoping Hannibal would be feeling better today. The grass outside was silver with a light frost, and Will wondered if autumn lingered before giving way to the harshness of winter in Lithuania, or if winter came all at once with a wrath. He wondered how warm it got in the summer there, and how deep the snow got in the winter. He wondered if Hannibal would find similarities here a comfort, or if he could only find comfort in the differences.

If Hannibal hated the cold, maybe he should go further south. In places like New Orleans, it never really got cold. Just cooler and very hot.

Would Hannibal want that? Or was he one of those people who wasn’t built for the heat and would just be miserable?

Will shook his head. All these thoughts were unreasonable. He wasn't about to move to New Orleans, and he doubted Hannibal was either. They had only been together for a short time, so it would be ridiculous to assume they would move there together. They didn't even live together, and hadn't even talked about it.

Will called all the dogs as he pulled on his coat, opening the front door and letting them spill out into the yard.

He wouldn't be against living together. As long as they could have dogs.

Will ran with the dogs, throwing sticks and making sure they each got enough exercise. Max was mostly staying by Will's side, less energy than he used to have. That was alright, and seemed to give Winston the freedom to run and play with the others instead. Will gave Max some good scratches while the other dogs played, smiling as they watched it together.

It was wrong of him to be thinking all that about their relationship. It was all new and fresh, and they couldn't make big decisions like that right now. It wouldn't be fair to try, and he didn't even know if Hannibal would ever be open to that kind of thing. Hannibal might be entirely satisfied with where they were, at least after last night. Hannibal might not want to enter into that kind of long term commitment. Will didn't fit into Hannibal's lifestyle, so it wouldn't make sense for him to want Will to be so much a part of it.

Will groaned softly and rubbed at his face.

He couldn't stop overthinking.

Will called all the dogs back and checked them all for ticks and thorns before he let them into the house. Max hadn't shown any injuries the day before, and Will checked him again. While he looked a bit uncomfortable, he didn't seem to be in any pain. Will thought he would take him to the vet soon anyway, just to be sure nothing was wrong.

The house smelled amazing. Whatever Hannibal was cooking, it smelled good. That wasn't a surprise, but it still struck Will oddly this morning. Everything was just good today. At least so far. It was a good start.

"I'll be out in just a minute," Will told Hannibal on his way to the bathroom. He needed to get ready for the day, and he couldn't stop smiling.

When Will was finishing up, he caught a glance of himself in the mirror. The sight startled him and he paused to linger.

Will generally avoided his reflection when he could. It wasn't that he didn't think he looked nice, and *that* actually might have been part of his aversion. He had known since Steve Walters that he was good looking. At least enough to have met the standards of that monster. Seeing it felt wrong, and appreciating it was like a sin. But this morning, none of that felt like it held any weight. Will looked at himself in the mirror, and he liked what he saw.

His hair was wild, as always, his shirt was unironed, and his lips were dry from constant abuse and his own lack of hydration. But he looked good. His absurd grin made his eyes

sparkle, and he thought he could see at least part of what Hannibal saw when he looked at him. He understood how someone could look at him and see something they might want.

Will stared at himself for far longer than was strictly acceptable, finally huffing and shaking his head before he left. He didn't understand everything that was changing. It felt like his entire life had been turned upside down, and it was the best thing that had ever happened to him. He felt good.

Hannibal had made French toast, bacon, and hashbrowns. It was absolutely glorious, and Will realized he was starving.

They chatted about plans for the day, and it felt amazingly normal. Will usually hated small talk like this, but with Hannibal it didn't feel tedious. He wanted to know about Hannibal's life, and he didn't mind taking it easy this morning.

Eventually, they both had to leave for their respective jobs. Hannibal pulled Wil close and kissed him before they got into their cars, and Will thought he wouldn't mind starting every day like this.

On the drive, Will closed the door on that line of thought, opening up his thoughts about the Ripper. He was keeping them separate. He *would* keep them separate.

Chapter End Notes

I hope I got the timing right for this progression. I agonized over it for a long time, and I'm still nervous it feels too soon (I say when this is the most spaced out I've ever written anything in my life). I wanted to give Will a moment to feel good about the way he looks, because he's always given me the vibe of someone who doesn't like to think about his own appearance all that much. Maybe that's just me projecting. XD

Up next: Will gets back with the team, and a few more things fall into place.

67

Chapter Summary

Will is making everyone a little nervous, but he's getting excited.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Welcome back."

Will glanced up and smiled when he met Beverly's eyes. He didn't feel nervous about her, and he was feeling good today. It struck him that he felt perfectly fine with making eye contact with her, his levels of anxiety not spiking at all despite the fact that she wasn't Hannibal. If that wasn't a clear sign of how he was actually recovering, he didn't know what was.

"Thanks," he said, "I think the time off did me some good, as unfortunate as the reason was."

Beverly nodded, studying him carefully. He didn't feel nervous, but being in her obvious scrutiny did make him feel a bit uncomfortable. He wondered what she saw when she looked at him, aside from all the dog hair.

"You look good," she said, smiling, "you're finally meeting my eyes, too. I guess getting a boyfriend does wonders."

Will flushed, clearing his throat. That word, again. It clanged discordantly, but he wasn't upset with her for using it.

"I didn't realize you knew about that," he said.

Beverly laughed.

"You didn't know because you were too busy staring at him, but I was there that day. Lecter took a beating, but you were there to kiss it all better."

Will ducked his head sheepishly. He was glad she seemed to approve, and he was alright with her thinking his good mood was entirely on account of Hannibal. The idea that he was in a good mood because he was finally able to dive completely into the mind of the Ripper again wasn't exactly one he wanted to share with the class. Though, it did make him nervous to talk about Hannibal here at work, since he was trying so hard to keep them separate in his mind. But she didn't know, so she wouldn't have had any reason to avoid asking about it.

“Did I miss any developments in the case?” he asked, though he knew the answer. Unless they had found something new since yesterday, he knew about it all.

“Nope,” Beverly said, “the Baltimore Banner is trying to insist we have to give them exclusive inside information, since Foltz was their intern. Jack is dealing with it, but he’s been more frustrated because you were gone. How long do you think we have before another body shows up?”

Will shook his head. He was honestly surprised another hadn’t appeared while he was out of the state. The Ripper usually completed his sounders in rapid succession. Maybe it was more evidence the Ripper was really fixated on Will, and had known he was gone. That should have made him nervous, but it didn’t. He wouldn’t mention it to Jack, either, afraid to get kicked off the case because he was at risk. He would just have to gather these clues in secret so he could make a plan.

“Not long,” he said, “For all I know, there might already be one waiting to be found. The Ripper works quickly.”

Beverly nodded.

“Do you have any idea who the Ripper’s fixated on? You said the last one was a message.”

Will nodded.

“It was. He’s trying to talk to someone. I’m hoping the next scene will be more specific. Tell us who.”

Beverly hummed in agreement. Will felt a bit bad for all the deception. He hated lying, but he didn’t feel he had any other choice in this matter. He had to stay on the case, and he had to see the next body. He couldn’t afford to let the truth get in the way of that.

“This one sure didn’t tell me much,” Beverly said, “No fibers. Even Jimmy and Brian were disappointed. Other than what’s obvious, the killer didn’t leave much for us.”

Will nodded again. He wasn’t surprised. The Ripper had never left them anything to go on before, and Will didn’t really expect him to start now.

At least, he didn’t expect anything Forensics could use. If the Ripper wanted to meet Will face to face, as he must, he would have to leave something Will could use to find him. Will would be watching, and he knew the Ripper would make himself known eventually. As long as Will didn’t give him any reason to believe he couldn’t understand.

“If we knew who the message was for, we might be able to use them to get the Ripper to make a mistake,” Beverly said thoughtfully, almost wistful, “Or at least give us something to work with.”

Will nodded, thinking hard about that. It would be easy if they had someone who was a civilian. It would be easy to put them into the public eye and make statements alluding to

their connection to the Ripper. Things that would excite the Ripper to action, and draw him out.

But things were so much more complicated than that. Will couldn't tell Jack it was meant for him, so he couldn't explain any plans he had to Jack. If he could even figure out a way to do it, he would be on his own. And he was already in the public eye. People already knew his name and face in connection to the case. He would have to think of an entirely different tactic, and risk his life to pull it off without Jack shutting it down.

There was one place he could start, though. One way he might draw the Ripper's attention back to his work, instead of the rest of his life.

Jack walked in, and Will immediately caught him.

"I want to work in the field," he said.

Jack froze, clearly surprised and unsure if he could trust what he had heard. But Will caught a glint of hope there as well, as he began to plan on Will's presence in the field.

"Are you sure, Will?" Jack asked, trying to respect his boundaries.

Will appreciated that.

"Yes. At least on a trial run. I want to be involved in every part of the investigation from now on. I think it will help."

Jack nodded.

"I'll see if I can make that happen," he said, and Will knew he would, "any reason you changed your mind?"

Will shrugged, smiling, but keeping it small and wry so as not to make Jack feel something was going on he needed to know about.

"I'm feeling better, and I want to do whatever I can to catch him."

Jack was clearly still curious, but not about to look a gift horse in the mouth. He probably thought Hannibal had been gently prodding Will towards this outcome, playing both sides as it were. Will didn't think it was necessary to tell him Hannibal didn't know he was asking to be put back in the field. The less Hannibal knew, the better. For now.

"Alright, have you had any new ideas about the Ripper? Anything that can help us? What do you think he does with the organs?"

Will shook his head slowly. He didn't know. It was one thing he hadn't figured out yet. He needed more time, more material. He needed to spend some more time in the mind of the Ripper, and learn every facet of him.

Sounders of three. Rapid fire. *Sounders* .

Why did he always think of them in terms of sounders? Because the Ripper considered them to be pigs. But how far did that extend? To what degree did he consider them livestock?

Oh.

“He’s eating them,” Will said, startling himself by speaking aloud. He hadn’t realized he was going to tell Jack his thought right away, but now there was no going back. He had to convince Jack he was right, now.

Jack had frozen, his entire body tensing when Will had opened his mouth. Will could see in his face he was prepared to believe, possibly only because Will was the one saying it, but he would need more than just the single statement. He needed some evidence. Will had to convince him.

“Listen,” Will said, his mind racing as it went over every bit of evidence he knew of that could potentially point in this direction, “every piece that’s been missing are parts of the body that can be eaten, or are eaten from animals. He kills in groups, quickly. Batches. He’s restocking his pantry. He’s getting rid of the evidence. It makes sense. He never leaves anything behind at the scenes, so it makes sense he wouldn’t want to keep evidence sitting around in his house either. This way, he’s getting rid of everything. He sees the victims as pigs, nothing more. They’re just livestock, and the purpose of livestock is to be eaten. In his mind, he’s doing them a favor by letting them also become art in the form of his staged scenes. It makes sense. He’s not like Hobbs, but he does eat them.”

Jack considered that for a long moment. Will noticed Price and Zeller in his periphery, both looking extremely uncomfortable by what he had just said. Beverly didn’t seem all that disturbed, but Will did notice she had become more somber as he spoke.

Because this was serious, and bad. It wasn’t something to be admired or excited about. Will needed to be careful, because his heart was thumping excitedly in his chest at this new revelation, and he was having entirely the wrong reaction to learning the Ripper was consuming the pieces of the victims he took.

The truth of the matter was that Will found it more fascinating than horrific. He was curious. How would the Ripper prepare the meat? Surely he wouldn’t eat it raw, though that would be a clear act of animal domination. No, the Ripper would cook it. Did he cook well? Did he feed it to others or hoard it to himself? Did he enjoy it, or did he do it only for symbolic reasons and he merely endured it?

What did it taste like?

There were too many questions Will wanted the answers to, and he hadn’t had enough time to find the answers yet. He would have to spend some more time thinking about this. It could help him find the Ripper, potentially. Or at least target his actions better in order to get a reaction.

“How sure are you on this, Will?” Jack asked, and Will realized just how horrified he was by the entire idea. Jack was honestly unnerved.

Will sighed softly.

“I’m pretty sure,” he said, “Somewhere around eighty nine percent sure. And the only reason it’s that low is because I don’t think it’s something he wants us to know, necessarily. A lot of the other things I know about him are things he’s basically been telling us outright through his scenes. This one is subtler. Almost hidden. He’s not telling me. He’s not confessing it through his work. But I think I’m right.”

Jack nodded, and Will knew he accepted it as fact. His confidence in Will was reassuring, and slightly worrying. Will wondered if Jack would get a second opinion or not. Would he talk to Hannibal about it? Or was he so sure Will was right he wouldn’t bother to ask what anyone else thought? That could be bad for the investigation, even if it was good for Will’s personal intentions.

Most likely, Hannibal would find out what Will thought. Will wasn’t sure if Hannibal would be upset to not have heard it directly from Will, or if he would accept it as a condition of the line Will had drawn in the sand.

He guessed he would find out.

Chapter End Notes

Inching ever closer to the big reveal. But when will I finally have mercy on the audience and drop the dime?~ Only time will tell. (I love to torture you *^^*)

Up next: Will asks Hannibal something he's been wondering about. They're soft about it, of course.

68

Chapter Summary

Will asks for clarification, and Hannibal uses it as an opportunity.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"What did you say to Chilton?" Will asked.

Hannibal lifted his gaze from the sketchbook, his expression curious. Will knew this was a delicate subject, because it was just on the line between work and personal life. But he hoped he could keep it separate enough.

"Many things, though I assume you mean to inquire after a particular instance," Hannibal said calmly, though he didn't return to sketching.

Will huffed softly. He knew Hannibal could guess, but he almost always made Will say things outright. Probably another of those psychiatrist tricks. Will didn't mind it, usually.

"When you went to see Gideon," he said, "At the conference, he said you made a display at the hospital, and you agreed you'd said something inadvisable."

Hannibal smiled and shut the sketchbook.

"While I may have said something inadvisable, Frederick was the one who made a display of it," he said.

Will huffed a laugh. That was Hannibal's way of saying "he started it" and he wasn't even trying to hide that fact from Will. It was endearing.

"Alright, but what happened?" he asked.

Hannibal's expression fell, and he looked honestly reluctant to say. Will wasn't sure he had ever seen Hannibal look quite like that. Either he had genuinely made a fool of himself, and he didn't want Will to laugh at him, or it concerned something Will wouldn't like.

"I did not tell you before, because I did not want to add any more stress to the situation," Hannibal said, giving Will a better idea of which option it was, "but given you have been doing well recently, I think perhaps it will not do any harm to tell you now. I hope it does not."

Despite himself, Will was more curious now than before. He leaned forward, intent on finding out what had happened.

Hannibal sighed softly.

“Despite my best efforts, your name was mentioned,” Hannibal said, and he wasn’t meeting Will’s eyes, “Frederick recalled that he had spoken with you, and he made a few comments that were offensive. My anger towards him was only intensified by my anger that Jack Crawford did nothing to stop him from continuing to speak that way.”

Hannibal’s hands were wringing themselves together on top of the sketchbook in his lap, and Will was surprised by how openly he was showing his nerves. The weather might have been affecting him, making his feelings more obvious, but Will could see that the reaction was honest. That Hannibal could be so open and sincere was sometimes overwhelming, after seeing Hannibal as a monolith so much.

“What did he say? Will asked.

Hannibal looked up and met Will’s eyes, a strange helplessness in his face Will hardly recognized. Hannibal knew what he was about to say was going to make Will unhappy, possibly hurt him.

“He implied that not only should you have come in person to the prison, but that you should not have been allowed to leave,” Hannibal confessed sadly.

Will’s mind revolted, flooding his thoughts with images of prison cells, cinder block walls, cold corridors. He felt his chest tighten for the first time in a while, and his breathing became shallow and labored.

Doctor Chilton thought Will belonged in prison. In the prison for people who are insane. Doctor Chilton thought Will was crazy, and should be locked up to protect people.

And he was right, wasn’t he? Will knew it. He was dangerous and unstable. The only things that made him feel stable and in control were violence and horror. He was a monster just as surely as anything, and Chilton had seen it.

What if Hannibal saw it? What would happen when he did? What would he do if he found out he was in love with a monster wearing a man?

Hannibal reached for Will’s hands, but Will pulled away.

“What did you say to him?” Will asked, his words coming out soft and breathy as he tried to pull air into his lungs.

Hannibal hesitated before taking back his hands, and he looked slightly hurt by Will’s rejection of his touch. Will felt a pang of regret, realizing Hannibal didn’t understand why he had pulled away. He would have to explain later.

“I was very unprofessional,” Hannibal said ruefully, “I may have insinuated that his position as the head of the hospital was his only option, as his techniques are so woefully ineffective,

if not actively harmful, that only individuals who have been condemned by society are given the unfortunate consequence of experiencing them."

Hannibal paused, but Will knew there was more. His breathing was a bit easier, now, but he just waited for Hannibal to continue.

"I may also have said, very bluntly, that you are more than capable of getting whatever it is you want, merely by asking for it. That should you desire, I would find a way to ruin him."

Will's jaw dropped, and he felt his chest expand as he took in a deep breath.

Before any of this, Hannibal had said those things to Chilton. It put Chilton's words and actions from the conference into a new context, and it made more sense. Chilton had wanted to get a reaction out of Will, make him break down, to prove Hannibal wrong on one count, as well as he had hoped to humiliate Hannibal in front of others in retaliation for his other words.

Hannibal had said those things because someone had spoken ill of Will when he wasn't there to defend himself. No wonder he had been so protective afterwards. He felt he had to defend Will. Because Jack wouldn't.

"I apologize, Will," Hannibal said, and he looked honestly contrite, possibly thinking Will was upset with him. Will could hardly stand it. "I had not expected him to ever have the chance to retaliate for it, especially against you. It is my fault he was set on upsetting you at the conference."

Will surged forward and caught Hannibal in a kiss. He was suddenly desperate for Hannibal, for his taste and touch and warmth.

No one had ever done this much for Will. No one had ever shown this much care and dedication before. No one had been Will's protector like that. Will had been on his own for so long, unable to rely on anyone. Hannibal was perfect for Will in every way. He made himself into anything Will needed him to be, and seemed happy to do it.

Hannibal held Will close, though Will could feel his bewilderment.

He had thought he was being rejected, and now he did not know what Will's actions meant.

"That's why you were so angry with Jack for Chilton being at the conference," Will breathed when they broke for air, "why you were so defensive of me until I told you to stop. God, I can't get enough of you. You're too good to be true."

Hannibal smiled, clearly relieved by Will's words.

"I should have told you sooner, so you could have been prepared," Hannibal said, "but I worried I had overstepped my bounds and you would be angry with me. I felt I had something to make up for."

Will grinned and slid his fingers into Hannibal's hair. He could hardly believe Hannibal existed. He was exactly what Will needed, all the time. Will wanted to climb into Hannibal's

chest and be safe in his ribcage. He knew Hannibal would let him.

“I wish I could have seen Chilton’s face when you said that to him,” Will said, “just imagining it, I feel vindicated.”

Hannibal huffed a soft laugh and leaned forward to nuzzle at the side of Will’s neck.

“Aš myliu tave, vilkas,” he mumbled, “Tu puikiai už mane.”

Will grinned.

“I’ve said it before, and I’ll say it again. I love it when you do that. Even though I don’t understand the words, I really love hearing them from you.”

Hannibal kissed Will’s neck.

“I am endeavoring to be as brave as you are,” he said, “the last person to hear me speak my native tongue was Mischa before she died. I have not spoken it since, for similar reasons to you not speaking of Lirette. Your bravery and openness inspired me.”

Will was overwhelmed with feelings about that admission. He was always amazed when Hannibal was vulnerable with him, and this was such an intimate, core part of his soul. Will felt privileged to be given even a piece.

“Do you feel afraid every time?” Will asked, “the way I did when I told you about him?”

Hannibal pulled back to look Will in the face, his hands coming up to cup Will’s jaw gently.

“More afraid than I have been in my adult life,” Hannibal confessed, “I have only once before had something in my life I fear losing as much as I do you. But to bring you joy in any way, I will gladly face such fear. You have made me feel many things I thought I would never experience, and I am grateful for it at the same time as I am more frightened than I can remember being.”

Will was amazed. He could never see fear in Hannibal’s face while they were together. He always looked so confident and sure of himself. To hear he was frightened so much, just by the way he felt for Will, while being so composed, bewildered Will. No one would ever know from being around Hannibal that he was afraid. Hannibal had crafted a mask so perfect that no one would ever know it wasn’t real. He even managed to hide things from Will, despite his insight.

Hannibal kissed Will, washing away any bad things that might try to crawl into his head. Will didn’t wonder what Hannibal might be hiding, or why. It would be hypocritical of him to be upset over that. He was hiding things from Hannibal, now.

“The things I would do for you, Will Graham,” Hannibal said softly, like a vow.

Chapter End Notes

How are we feeling about that? Do we believe Hannibal entirely?

Up next: Will is in the field, but not exactly enthused about the case.

Isn't it funny how I managed to time it so chapter 69 is going up on Valentines day? XD The stars have aligned. See you then. ;)

69

Chapter Summary

As promised, a bouquet of corpses. For valentines day ;)

Chapter Notes

^ Probably not from who you wanted, though.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Will had said he wanted to be in the field, he had only been thinking of the Ripper. He had, for the moment, entirely forgotten he would have to work other cases in between scenes from the Ripper.

This scene was a reality check Will could have gone without.

“World’s sickest jigsaw puzzle,” Zeller said, grimacing as he photographed the structure.

“Yeah, but where are the corners?” Price asked, earning a questioning look from Zeller, “My mom always said, start a jigsaw with the corners.”

Will mostly tuned them out as they discussed that irrelevant topic, circling the macabre totem pole and feeling for the mind of the killer in this. It was subtle, soft-spoke, unnoticeable. This killer didn’t usually make a spectacle like this.

That was why he did it.

“He killed all of them,” Will said to himself, his eyes trailing down to the bodies at the base of the tower. They were the oldest, those longest dead. The bodies were fresher up the pole, topped with the newest addition, a young man who had been killed just to complete it. “He never got caught. He’s never been recognized for his work. This is his magnum opus, his curtain call. His surrender.”

Will closed his eyes and reached out with his mind, curious about the boy on the top. Why was he so special?

Legacy.

Will had an idea, but he would have to see what forensics found before he could be sure.

“Will?” Jack asked, pulling him from his thoughts. By looking at Jack, Will guessed he had been saying something before, and Will hadn’t heard him. “What are you thinking?”

Will ran a hand over his face, huffing out a white cloud of air.

“These people,” he said, gesturing to the tower of corpses, “their death certificates say accidental death or wrongful death, or something. The ones that have death certificates. They were actually all murdered by the same person. The seven here were the ones that were never found. He wants us to know that we haven’t caught him, that he’s gotten away with all of these for all these years. Decades. He dug them all up just to say it.”

Jack frowned at the scene, slowly processing what Will had said.

“And the kid?” he asked, waving to the top of the tower where the young man was perched.

Will wet his lips.

“I have an idea. We need to find out who he is, and test his DNA against whatever parents he has listed.”

Jack’s eyebrows shot up. It was clear he was unsure what Will meant, but had several ideas about what he might mean by it. Will wished he wouldn’t do that, but he guessed there wasn’t really any way for him to stop. It was just the way his mind worked.

It wasn’t the Ripper, and Will had an idea this case would wrap up quickly. The killer wanted to be found. He wasn’t hiding anymore.

Will snapped his eyes up, not knowing why until he saw Hannibal at the yellow tape, entering the crime scene. Will couldn’t help smiling when he saw him, just a bit, but then his gaze caught on a mass of red curls and his expression fell again.

Exactly what he wanted, though he expected it would not be entirely pleasant.

Will rounded the structure of bodies again, needing Lounds to get a few good shots of him before Hannibal joined him there. Jack walked with him, staring at the tower with evident disgust.

Will felt no disgust. When he looked at the totem pole, he was filled only with pride and wry amusement because of his own hunch. The killer did not horrify him. There seemed to be few things that could.

“The rates of decay imply a long term effort,” Hannibal said casually as he came to stand beside Will, “That is, if they were all killed by the same person, and this is not simply a case of corpse desecration.” He glanced at the empty graves around them. “At least for some.”

Will nodded.

“They were all killed by the same person. He dug them up so he could show us how he had everyone fooled.”

Maybe not everyone.

Hannibal hummed in consideration.

“He is celebrating his cleverness, and laughing at law enforcement,” he mused, “but surely he knows there are risks.”

Will smiled. Hannibal was following the same line of thought Will had found. They were just alike in that way. They saw things in the same way, even if Will made connections faster.

“He wants to be caught,” Will said, “he’s old now. He’s retiring. He doesn’t want to die with any regrets. He would regret never being acknowledged for his work. For not leaving a legacy.”

Hannibal’s eyes lifted to the boy at the top. Will had to suppress a smile, knowing Freddie was still there. It wouldn’t look good.

“He thinks that was one of them,” Will agreed, nodding, knowing what Hannibal was thinking, “One of his life’s regrets. But I think he’s wrong. We’ll have to check, but I think he just made the biggest mistake of his life.”

Hannibal met Will’s eyes, and his lips twitched in an aborted smile. Will was glad he wasn’t the only one having to work to seem serious. Though, perhaps that should have concerned him. Hannibal also saw the irony in the acts of the killer, and shared Will’s wry amusement.

“What are you two thinking?” Jack asked, clearly miffed to be left out of their conversation, where half the communication was silent.

Will turned to Jack and shook his head. With Hannibal backing him, he thought he could tell Jack his suspicion without feeling like he was going to make a fool of himself. Jack would believe him if Hannibal agreed.

“I can’t be sure yet, but I think the kid was his biological son. He was angry that the woman he wanted went with someone else, and he thinks the kid belonged to the other man. I think the woman loved him, but saw a glimpse of the monster side of him. She left him because she wouldn’t live with him that way, but the kid really was his. Killing him was supposed to be his way of cutting off that regret in his life. He wanted to leave a legacy. But he killed it instead, because he didn’t know.”

Jack’s brow furrowed and his expression stormed, clearly affronted by the very idea of a man killing his own child, knowingly or not. Jack was angry. Angry because he was being mocked, angry because people had died, angry because he was still being played with by the killer, and angry that his idea of family had been so tainted. Just because of how strongly Jack felt about this case now, Will knew he would do whatever it took to catch the killer.

Will wondered if he would get to meet the man, working in the field now as he did. He wasn’t sure if he wanted to or not. He wasn’t sure if it would be a good idea for him to.

“Jack,” Hannibal said, getting his attention before nodding towards the police tape, “I believe Freddie Lounds is here. You may want to have her escorted away, though I suppose the damage has been done already.”

Jack groaned and rubbed at his face with both hands. He looked tired, and Will wondered what was going on that would make him seem that way. It couldn’t just be work, because he had never seemed this tired before, when their workload had been heavier. There had to be something else.

Will shook his head to clear those thoughts away. It would distract him from his job. This case was already a distraction from the Ripper, which was what Will really cared about at the moment. He was anxious to see the next Ripper scene, and he knew it would drop soon. It had to.

Jack had a few officers escort Lounds away. Jack didn’t watch her as she left, but Will noted how she smiled charmingly to the officers and attempted to chat them up. He saw how she glanced back at him, catching his eye and raising an eyebrow at him. He saw how she had one hand in her pocket, where her camera was no doubt concealed.

She had got what she wanted, which meant so had Will. He would be out in the public eye, prominently. He would be the face of it all, for the Ripper to see.

Now, he just needed to see how the Ripper would react.

Will wondered if Jack would be upset when he found out. He wondered if Jack would want Will to step out of the spotlight. He wondered if Jack would suspect why he was doing this. He wondered if Hannibal would.

Will turned back to find Hannibal watching him carefully. If he didn’t know what Will was doing, he certainly suspected something going by that look. Will wondered if he would confront him about it.

“Shall we make our way to the labs and draw up a proper profile?” Hannibal asked, as casual as if he was inviting Will to lunch.

Will nodded.

“I guess we ought to,” he said, “we’ll probably just be in the way, here.”

Hannibal smiled, nodded, and led the way to where the cars had been left. Will noticed that Hannibal walked much closer to him today, almost as if trying to feel Will’s warmth. Will wondered again if Hannibal was aware of how he reacted to the cold weather. He didn’t seem to know he was doing it, but Will knew he was capable of hiding such things. He very well might be aware, but was doing what he could to hide his reactions.

“You are working in the field,” Hannibal noted as they neared the cars.

Will blinked, then nodded. He had forgotten he hadn’t told Hannibal about that.

“Yeah,” he said, “I’ve been feeling good enough lately that I thought I could handle it. Jack was happy to hear it, and I figure I’ll be able to do more this way. If it backfires, I’ll stop. Don’t worry about that. Jack’s respecting my boundaries so far.”

Hannibal nodded, but he was silent until they reached the cars and would part ways for a short time.

“I am saddened you did not tell me of it,” he said gently, unable to meet Will’s eyes, “I would have thought it would be a discussion before you made such a decision. You are allowed to do whatever you want, of course, but I am surprised.”

Will frowned, feeling a pang of guilt. He hadn’t really meant to keep it a secret. He was just trying to keep it all separate, and so hadn’t said anything. Not to mention, it had been almost impulsive, when he had asked Jack to put him back in the field. But he could have mentioned it to Hannibal later, at the very least.

Will sighed and rubbed at his face. Everything was getting so complicated.

“I’m sorry,” he said, “I didn’t mean to upset you. I’ve just been compartmentalizing recently, trying to build walls between the dark and the light in my head. I decided not to blur my personal life with work, and I guess I did it too well. Are you angry?”

Hannibal huffed softly and shook his head.

“No,” he said, “Not at all. I understand, and I will not be upset the next time you do not tell me something about work. My surprise was what caused it, and I know you meant no harm. I just hope you remember that you can talk to me if you ever need to.”

Will smiled.

“I know.”

Chapter End Notes

Not a very romantic or spicy chapter 69, was it? Ah, c'est la vie. Sorry. Happy Valentine's Day anyhow. And happy discount chocolate day tomorrow to those who celebrate.

Up next: Hannibal gets Will to talk about the Ripper again.

70

Chapter Summary

Hannibal utilizes a loophole in the boundaries Will has set.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“We are at work, so can you safely discuss the Ripper case with me now?” Hannibal asked.

Will paused. They had basically finished the profile of their totem pole killer, so it made sense Hannibal would turn back to the Ripper now. Will hadn’t been talking to him about it at all in the past weeks, despite them seeing each other nearly every day.

“If you have questions about the case, I can answer them,” Will agreed, “I don’t see any reason why not.”

In reality, he felt a strangeness in the moment, his thoughts turning to the Ripper while Hannibal was right there. He had been doing really well with keeping it all separate, even in his mind. He hadn’t thought about Hannibal and the Ripper in the same branch for a while. But now, it was strange, and he felt the beginning of a blur. He would have to try to fix it later.

They did work together, and Will needed to talk to Hannibal about the cases. They were at work.

“I have been told you believe the Ripper is a cannibal,” Hannibal said, and Will could tell he had indeed been disappointed to hear it from someone other than Will himself. But he didn’t say as much. “Tell me what led you to think so.”

Will huffed softly, shrugging.

“Just about everything,” he said, “Part of it is the beginning. He wanted me to look back to the Hobbs case for a reason. More than just the fact that he was the copycat. More than that being when he noticed me. I think he wanted me to remember Hobbs because there was something there for me to see beyond all that. Hobbs honored every part of his victims, but I think the Ripper believes he elevates his victims to art. At the same time, he’s showing dominance by mutilating them and consuming a part of them.”

Will allowed the Ripper’s mind to wash over him, drowning all other thoughts for the moment. It was a pleasant thing, letting the Ripper reside there so deeply. It dulled the tragedy of life. God knew Will needed that.

“Everything he takes from them is edible, if you look. I had them check, after I thought of it. They’re all pieces you might eat from a pig or an animal. Some are more strange as meat, but not unbelievable. You don’t see many people eat lungs, at least knowingly, but they can be eaten. He sees them as less than, like livestock. And he’s too smart to keep evidence like that around. Especially considering how much flesh he must have taken by now.”

Will tipped his head back and looked up at the ceiling, the image of the shining wings bursting forth in front of his eyes like a vision from heaven.

“I think I must have known, before,” he said, “or at least suspected. I’ve always used the term sounders for the groups of killings with him. A group of pigs. It’s fitting, and I hadn’t realized just how fitting it was until I realized he was eating them. I was trying to tell myself all this time, and I finally got the hint.”

Will blinked, and the vision of the wings disappeared. He looked back at Hannibal and smiled wryly.

“Any thoughts to add?” he asked.

Hannibal considered it.

“For many of the things you have said about the Ripper, they have been what you believe he wants to say through his scenes,” Hannibal noted, “But this seems different.”

Will nodded, excited that Hannibal could see that as well. It was nice to talk to someone who understood things the way he did.

“I don’t think he was trying to tell this part to us,” Will agreed, “He hasn’t necessarily been hiding it, but he wasn’t showing it off. Maybe he wants to see if I’ll figure things out without him having to spell it out for me. We won’t know until the next body drops.”

Hannibal nodded.

“So you are certain the Ripper is talking to you?” he asked, “the last time we discussed it, you still spoke as if you were hesitant to accept it.”

Will shrugged.

“I’m working under that assumption for the time being,” he said, though he felt it wasn’t entirely the truth, “Until he tells us something different, I need some ground to stand on and that’s it. And it makes sense.”

Hannibal hummed thoughtfully.

“Do you believe the Ripper is testing you? That he will not contact you directly until he is sure you understand every part of him?”

Will considered it.

“In some sense, maybe,” he said, “I think he’ll contact me face to face eventually, no matter what. Because he believes he’s in love with me, or something close to it. He might be testing me, to see how far I can get without meeting him, but I think it’s more that he’s preparing me for when he shows himself. He doesn’t want me to be overwhelmed. If I’m overwhelmed when we meet, I don’t think he’s confident he can predict what I’ll do.”

Hannibal smiled.

“I would be surprised if he could ever predict you, Will,” he said, “even now, I find you surprise me every day.”

Will grinned.

“I guess someone ought to keep you on your toes, and I’ll be glad for it to be me,” he said, “I thought from the beginning you aren’t surprised by much.”

Hannibal hummed in agreement.

“You have brought excitement to my life.”

Will huffed a laugh.

“Alright. I think you’re about caught up on the Ripper now, unless you have another question.”

Hannibal leaned forward in his chair, his gaze intense as it settled on Will. It was reminiscent of the early days of their acquaintance, when Hannibal’s fascination was strong and strange to Will because of the newness of it. He smiled at the memories, but his mood fell when Hannibal asked his question.

“Are you trying to antagonize the Ripper by putting yourself back into the public eye, and working in the field?”

Will sighed.

“I wondered if you were going to ask about that,” he said, “I could see it in your face that you thought I was up to something.”

Hannibal didn’t say anything, just waiting for Will to answer his question. He knew Will would, because he always did.

Will spread his hands over the desk, palms up.

“I have a lot of reasons for getting into the field now. Part of it might be that I think the Ripper will react. I don’t think he’ll be angry, necessarily. You can’t tell Jack. He can’t know I’m using myself as bait like this. And we only talk about it here. At work.”

Hannibal nodded, and Will knew he would keep his mouth shut about it. They had a lot of secrets from Jack. It was almost funny that their relationship wasn’t one of them.

“I also think it will be better for me to be at the scenes sooner,” Will admitted, “I see things more clearly when I am. I don’t want to miss anything.”

Hannibal agreed.

“If not angry, how do you expect the Ripper to feel from seeing you so involved in cases?” he asked, “You expect a response, but not one in anger.”

Will shrugged.

“I’m a good fisherman, Hannibal,” he said with a bit of a smile, “I’m trying to catch a fish that isn’t hungry. At least, he doesn’t think he’s hungry. In that case, you have to use live bait, something that moves and disturbs the water, excites him to action. Get him to bite even though he doesn’t want it. I’m already the bait, he made that part easy. Now, I’m disturbing the waters.”

Hannibal laughed softly.

“I have huge faith in you, Will,” he said, “I believe it will work just as you have said. You have not been wrong once yet.”

Will frowned. That was worrying.

“I can’t be right every time,” he said, feeling a bit of worry gnawing at his thoughts, “sooner or later I’m going to make a mistake. I’m gambling with high stakes. People could die, have died, probably will die, because of me. I can’t afford to make a mistake, but I’m only human. I’m going to. You should be trying to stop me before I make everything exponentially worse.”

Will met Hannibal’s eyes and saw that he was watching Will with proud admiration. Will knew at once that Hannibal would not be the one to push back or criticize Will’s plans. Hannibal would just allow Will to do whatever he chose to, without getting in the way. He offered no resistance. Because he was the only one Will felt safe admitting his plans to, no one was there to stop him.

That could be very dangerous.

“You know, you’re not really helping,” Will accused, though there was no strength in it because his chest was filled with warmth as he looked at Hannibal.

“I apologize,” Hannibal said with a smile, “I admire you so. You are aware that you are risking much, and that you are fallible. Most in your position would find themselves overcome with pride and form the beginnings of a god complex. Despite this, you have kept yourself humble, and objective. I cannot help but wonder at your intelligence.”

Will huffed and shook his head.

“With you around, it’s a wonder I haven’t become a narcissist,” he said, “but my point still stands. You’re the only one in a position to stop me. If you think it’s too dangerous, you should. I might get upset about it, but most likely I’ll understand.”

Hannibal nodded.

“If I ever believe you are going too far, I will stop you,” he said.

That was all Will could really ask for. He believed Hannibal would, or at least would try to. They didn’t lie to each other. Hannibal would try, and believe he was doing what was best. That was all Will could expect, and all he asked.

“Thanks.”

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Will Graham in the field again

What does this mean for the Ripper case? Has the FBI given up, or do they feel the time that has passed since the most recent Ripper kill means they have missed their chance? Has Agent Graham become bored with the Ripper, and decided to focus on new killers instead?

At this gruesome scene where a killer has made a monument out of his victims, Will Graham was seen speculating about the motives of such a demented mind. His presence suggests the FBI has moved on from the Ripper case for the time being, after their humiliating stumble of claiming they had the man in custody already, he being Abel Gideon. Now that we know Abel Gideon is not the Ripper, it seems they are changing tactics, by completely ignoring the Ripper case until the killer gives them a reason to pay attention again.

It has been nearly a month since the Ripper demanded their attention again, proving the killer is not in custody, and likely not even in danger of being caught yet. With a scene that outshone all his past tableaus by gore and theatrics alike, the Ripper laughed at the FBI for so confidently claiming they had bested him. Agent Graham, who has stayed in the shadows of the investigation for the most part, aside from offering a statement at the ill fated press conference, has now appeared in the field to chase after less prominent killers.

Can we assume, then, that Will Graham is confident in his ability to catch the Ripper the moment he reappears, or has the agent given up entirely in the endeavor? We are left to speculate, as the FBI and Agent Graham alike refuse to speak with reporters or make another statement about any ongoing investigation.

Most likely, in some opinions, Agent Graham is working on a covert plan to draw the Ripper into the open again. By showing his face to the public, investigating other crimes, he is creating a facade of being occupied with other things, so the Ripper will not feel he is a prominent threat.

More pictures included below.

Chapter End Notes

Things are going to come to a head within the next ten chapters. That's a promise from me (so take it with a grain of salt, probably).

Up next: People start to notice Will's new attitude. Mixed reviews.

71

Chapter Summary

Lawrence Wells gets a verbal lashing. Hannibal is pleased.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"I'm done," Lawrence Wells said, looking small and tired. It was hard to believe he had made the totem pole they had found. Will wondered if he looked so tired because he had used the last of his energy to build it.

Will stepped forward, drawing Wells' gaze away from Jack.

"You wanted to leave a legacy," Will said, and he saw the truth of it reflected with recognition in the man's eyes. "Leave something of yourself on this earth after you die."

Lawrence nodded, his breath rasping softly.

"Yes," he said.

Will leaned closer, unable to keep himself from smiling a bit.

"You should have looked closer at that boy that should have been yours," he said, "you should have done the math. But you were too bitter and angry to seek her out and ask her if maybe you had a living legacy already. He was your son, and you killed him out of jealousy."

Lawrence looked up at Will with wide, horror filled eyes. His breathing grew more labored, wheezing as he understood what Will was telling him.

Will felt a deep, cruel satisfaction at seeing how much the truth was hurting this man. Will enjoyed being witness to his pain and suffering.

They called paramedics and arrested Lawrence Wells. He didn't look very good, but Will expected him to live for a while yet. And every day he was alive, he would carry the knowledge that he had killed his own son, destroying his legacy without ever knowing it.

Will was glad of that. He wanted Lawrence Wells to suffer for the rest of his life. He deserved it.

Jack was looking at Will strangely as they left, concern practically oozing from his every pore. Will didn't want to know what he was upset about, but he thought he was likely to find out the moment Jack had him alone.

That time came when they were back at Quantico. Jack put a hand on the door to the labs and stopped Will from opening it.

“What’s going on with you, Will?” Jack asked firmly.

Will sighed softly, but still refused to meet Jack’s eyes. He was trying to understand the Ripper. He didn’t really want to risk muddying the waters by getting a bunch of other people in his head now. It had been bad enough to have Lawrence Wells in there.

“What do you mean?” he asked. The least Jack could do was be a little more specific.

Jack’s frown deepened, and Will realized he had just made the situation worse by not knowing what Jack was talking about.

“With Wells, you weren’t yourself. Hell, you’re not yourself right now. Back there, you were cruel, like you wanted to hurt him. That’s not you. So tell me what’s going on with you.”

Will huffed his surprise and met Jack’s eyes just to see if he was being serious. For someone as self-righteous as Jack Crawford, it was a big deal for him to think someone else was treating a *serial killer* too poorly.

But he was serious. Jack was honestly worried about Will because he had been cruel to a murderer.

No, he was worried because he had seen that Will *liked* it.

Will had to choose, now. He could either tell Jack the truth and risk being put on a mental health leave, assigned another psychiatrist probably, or he could make up a believable lie and keep doing his job.

Will dropped his eyes and wet his lips, pulling his shoulders up almost to his ears.

“I’m sorry, Jack,” he said, letting his voice be small and frightened. More like the version of himself Jack had met and gotten used to before Hannibal had entered the equation. “It’s just- well, he reminded me of-” Will cut off and swallowed hard, scraping his thumb nail under his lip, “he reminded me of the man who took me when I was a kid. I wanted to defeat him, I wanted to hurt him. It was wrong. I shouldn’t have. I’m sorry.”

Will felt dirty for the lie, and the apologies when he felt like he had done nothing wrong. But he kept his head down and his posture closed, hoping Jack would buy it.

Jack cursed softly under his breath and took his hand from the door. Will made no move to open it.

“Hell. I’m sorry, Will,” Jack said, “I shouldn’t have made you tell me that. I shouldn’t have been upset. Wells deserved it anyway. Let’s just get back to work.”

Will nodded, biting his lip to keep from smiling. He didn’t much like lying, but he seemed to be pretty good at it.

He would tell Hannibal about this, later. He needed a second opinion, because maybe it was something he should be worried about. Maybe Jack was right, and Will was changing into something he didn't want to become.

Hannibal would settle the matter.

They went into the labs to finish up the case, and Will wondered when he would see another Ripper scene be brought in. He hoped the article by Freddie Lounds would entice him enough, but only time would tell.

He could hardly wait.

—

"Jack felt you were behaving too cruelly to the man?" Hannibal asked.

"Exactly," Will said, running his fingers through Hannibal's hair as the other man lay with his head in Will's lap. They were sitting by the fire, as had become their routine now the weather was cold. Hannibal still hadn't mentioned why he was so nervous. Will was content to wait.

"But you feel his reaction was more about the fact that it was you behaving thus, and not who it was directed at."

Will nodded.

"He still tries to see me as that bird with a broken wing," he said, "but I feel more and more like a monster."

Hannibal looked up at Will and smiled, his eyes filled with warmth.

"You worry because you do not feel guilt for your actions, though Jack had made you think you should," Hannibal said, and Will nodded, "Then tell me what you do feel about it."

Will sighed and looked into the fire, wondering what would happen if Hannibal agreed with Jack that Will was wrong.

"I felt good," he confessed, "I felt powerful, and righteous. He deserved to hurt, after all the hurt he caused without a reason. He thought he was so untouchable. I liked showing him he had failed."

Hannibal took one of Will's hands and kissed it.

"It is not wrong of you to feel such things," he said, "You are finally free of your chains, and you are learning how to use your strength. Jack was wrong to be upset by it."

Will looked down and smiled.

"I lied to him, though," he said, "I knew the truth would make him more upset, so I told a lie that perpetuates my appearance as something fragile."

Hannibal sat up and met Will's eyes levelly.

"Jack Crawford will continue to push your boundaries," he said seriously, "if he believes you are capable of something, he will demand more. He will break you if you let him. You are protecting yourself by keeping his expectations low enough you can handle his demands."

Will frowned. He wasn't entirely comfortable with the way Hannibal was talking about Jack. Will knew Jack didn't mean any harm, and was actively trying to do better in regards to Will specifically. He was surprised by Hannibal's continued low opinion of Jack in this way, because he should be able to see at least some of what Will did, and know he was trying.

Maybe it was still just Hannibal's compulsion to protect Will, and he had nowhere to direct those feelings but at Jack, who had been the cause of a lot of Will's recent stress. It might even be exacerbated by the oncoming winter. It occurred to Will that Hannibal wasn't aware the weather was affecting him in any way, and he wondered if maybe he should bring it up eventually.

Will could forgive Hannibal for this. He would just have to keep track of it and make sure it didn't go too far.

"You think I was right to lie?" Will asked.

Hannibal considered it, idly tracing patterns on the back of Will's hand.

"You are concerned that it is compromising your moral values, because you abhor lying," he said softly, "so long as you do not make a habit of it, I think you are safe in that respect. If you would like, I can help you to be sure you are not doing it too often."

Will wasn't sure how to feel about that. It felt wrong, to use Hannibal as a gauge for lying. He didn't have any plans to lie to Hannibal, and would sure tell him if he ever lied to Jack again, but he didn't entirely trust that Hannibal would tell him if he got to the point where he lied too often. While Hannibal didn't lie to Will, Will thought that was almost entirely because he knew Will would be upset by it. Because Will didn't like lies. He had promised not to lie to *Will* about anything, but he had made no such promise regarding others.

Maybe he didn't like it because Hannibal wasn't offering the same in return, and Will wouldn't ask it of him either.

It occurred to Will that he knew almost nothing about Hannibal's life outside of himself and work with the FBI. Will didn't have a life outside of the FBI and Hannibal, so Hannibal knew almost everything there was to know about him.

How could Will address that? He didn't want to be demanding of Hannibal, insist he be included in the rest of Hannibal's life. If Hannibal didn't want him there, Will shouldn't push the issue. But he did want to at least address it.

"Alright," Will said, but he knew he would have to think of a way to talk about this later.

Hannibal studied Will carefully for a long moment. Will knew he could tell he was bothered, but he didn't know if Hannibal would choose to ask about it.

"Do you know that when you are upset, a crease forms between your brows?" Hannibal asked gently, "I find it most endearing."

Hannibal pressed a kiss to the skin right between Will's brows, apparently where a crease had formed. Will felt his shoulders relax, tension leaving his body.

"You always know how to diffuse a situation," Will said, and there might have been a touch of resentment in his voice.

"You need not tell me what is troubling you if you don't wish," Hannibal said, his tone still soft and gentle, "I am sorry if I have done something to upset you."

Will sighed and pulled Hannibal into a kiss. He hadn't meant to make Hannibal think he was upset with him. It really wasn't anything Hannibal had done.

"No, it's not you," he said, "I just get to thinking, and I was making myself worry over something that's probably nothing."

Hannibal nodded.

"If I can be of any help in the matter, I hope you will feel comfortable speaking with me about it."

Will closed his eyes, allowing Hannibal's soft touch to center him.

"I'll let you know once I figure out how to say it without sounding like a complete idiot," he said, "I don't want to give you the wrong idea. Just give me some time."

Hannibal hummed his assent, pulling Will close and nuzzling into his hair. Will felt himself melt into the touch, the warmth and protection Hannibal offered. He only felt entirely safe and comfortable around Hannibal, and he never wanted to leave. He wanted to keep Hannibal with him all the time.

In that way, he could really relate to Garette Jacob Hobbs. He understood why someone would eat someone they loved rather than see them leave. He felt that same, bone deep ache to keep Hannibal with him, to consume him if it was the only way. He would not let Hannibal go.

That was dangerous. It was wrong. It was possessive and toxic. Will knew it.

So he didn't say anything. He didn't risk scaring Hannibal away.

Will was starting to keep secrets, and it seemed like now he couldn't stop.

Chapter End Notes

Will is picking up on the red flags! But he feels like he's also waving a few, so he thinks they even out. Whelp.

Up next: Beverly gives Will relationship advice. It helps.

72

Chapter Summary

More Beverly!!! And soft Hannibal.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"How's the boyfriend?" Beverly asked, trying to suppress her grin.

Will blinked, momentarily confused. Then, he realized what she meant.

"Oh," he said, huffing a soft laugh, "You mean Hannibal. I don't call him that, so I didn't realize who you were talking about. He's doing alright. Having a dinner party tonight."

Beverly grinned.

"That sounds nice. I hear he makes the best food. What do you call him, if not boyfriend?"

Will flushed lightly. He tried to make himself busy by tidying up his desk, though it wasn't all that messy to begin with.

"Well, I call him my beau," he said, "we're both a little old for the boyfriend moniker. I think he just calls me his partner, but we haven't exactly gone out much together, so I don't exactly know."

Beverly's grin widened.

"No? You guys have a lot of other stuff to do, I guess. Too busy to go out?" She asked, clearly suggesting something.

Will couldn't help but laugh. It wasn't often anyone felt comfortable enough around him to tease, and it was refreshing. Things with Hannibal always felt serious and significant. This felt easy and light.

"I mean, do I seem like the kind of guy who likes busy public places?" he asked, gesturing to himself, "and with a beau who cooks like Hannibal, we don't exactly need to go out to eat that much."

Maybe Beverly could hear something in his voice he hadn't meant to show, because she pursed her lips and looked him over.

"You *want* him to take you out," she said.

Will blanched a bit, surprised she had read him that easily. He didn't know what to say, how to react. He didn't know how she expected him to react to that.

Beverly nodded as if she understood everything.

"You want him to take you out, because you're feeling more able to deal with it, but you don't know how to bring it up since you two have been doing just fine being homebodies."

Will flushed and ducked his head. He guessed this was how he made other people feel a lot of the time, seeing more than they expected. Probably why Zeller and Price didn't like him much.

"Sorry if I don't know how to respond to this," Will said, "I'm not used to being seen through like that. I mean, you're right, but you led me to believe you're the fiber gal, *not* a psych wiz."

Beverly laughed and shook her head.

"Boy, I specialize in fibers, and I couldn't do half the things you do with psychology, but I know relationships. I've always been the one everyone else comes to when they've got problems, even though I don't date all that much myself. It's easy to give advice from the outside, and I have a good track record, all things told. Do you want my honest advice?"

Will figured she would honor his request not to say anything if he asked, but he was curious. And he had been looking for some way to fix this without making Hannibal feel like he had done something wrong. If she had an idea on how he could do it, he was more than happy to hear it.

"Might as well," he said.

Beverly nodded.

"You said he's hosting a dinner party tonight?" she asked, and Will nodded, "and he didn't invite you because he thought you wouldn't enjoy it, and you didn't do anything to make him think otherwise?" Will nodded again. "So, ask if you can be at the party."

Will frowned.

"Don't you think that's a bit last minute?" he asked, "I mean, it's the day of. He's been planning for over a month. I'll be throwing a monkey wrench into the whole deal and he'll hate that. Won't he?"

Beverly gave him a sympathetic look, as if he was a child learning the truth about something scary.

"Boy, if you think he'd be upset with you wanting to be at his party, you don't know a thing about him. He's the kind of guy who would *love* to show you off in front of his friends, and he's more than capable of fixing things so you can be there with him. He's so in love with you he would take the moon out of the sky to give it to you."

Will flushed. Hearing it from someone like Beverly meant a lot, even though he knew it. He didn't think either of them had actually used the word love before when talking to each other, about what they felt, but he knew that's what they had. He knew it, but he was afraid to admit it aloud.

"You really don't think he'll mind if I ask?" Will asked, chewing on his lip nervously.

Beverly laughed again and shook her head. She leaned against his desk and folded her arms.

"Tell you what, if he's upset, I'll take you out to dinner. Wherever you want. Not a date, obviously. I wouldn't want to step on Doctor Lecter's toes like that. But just a good old fashioned friend hangout. As an apology for being wrong. Deal?"

Will grinned.

That was another thing he had missed out on most of his life. He had never really had close friends after the basement, and he hadn't had the chance to go out with people and hang out. The thing he'd had with Hannibal at the start, while it had still been just a friendship, had still been different despite how casual they'd tried to make it. If he was doing well enough for that kind of thing, maybe he could have it now. With people like Beverly. Something much more casual than anything Hannibal had ever offered. Something easy.

"If everything works out, I'll buy," he said.

Beverly snorted a laugh.

"Deal."

—

"Will," Hannibal said, smiling warmly, "What a pleasant surprise. I wasn't expecting you. Is anything wrong?"

Will wet his lips, praying Beverly was right.

"No, nothing's wrong. I just wanted to talk to you, and I figured you'd be going on lunch right about now. You're not busy, are you?"

Hannibal grinned, clearly delighted.

"Of course not," he said, "I am never too busy for you, Will. Please come in."

Will stepped through the door to the office, smiling at the familiar room. It had been a while since he had been here, their relationship far from the therapist/patient one they had started out with. He saw there was a fire burning in the hearth, and the room was just a touch warmer than was strictly comfortable. Again, he wondered if Hannibal realized he did that kind of thing.

"Are you hungry? I am sure I have enough for two," Hannibal said, striding over to his desk where his usual bag sat. It was the same bag he had brought breakfast in when they were in

Minnesota.

“Sure,” Will said, “As long as it’s not a problem.”

Hannibal smiled, his eyes crinkling in that way Will loved.

“Never a problem. What is it you wanted to talk about?”

Will went over and leaned on the desk beside where Hannibal was setting out the containers of food. He was nervous, and his stomach was twisting into all kinds of knots as he prepared for what he was going to do.

“It’s about your dinner party,” Will said slowly.

Concern flickered over Hannibal’s face, and he paused in his movements.

“Has something come up?” he asked, “are you afraid it’s no longer wise? I understand if you are worried for me, and I will do whatever you think is prudent.”

Will held up a hand to stop his questions, smiling a little. He seemed willing to cancel the whole thing if Will just said the word. That gave credence to what Beverly had said, and it made him a little more confident in himself.

“Nothing like that, no,” Will said, “I wouldn’t dream of making you change your plans. I know you’ve been looking forward to it. No, see, I just wanted to see if maybe, uh, if I could maybe come?”

Will held his breath as he waited for Hannibal to answer, staring down at where Hannibal’s hands were idly resting on the desk. He would understand if Hannibal didn’t want him there, or couldn’t change things that quickly. But it would hurt. He would try not to let it, since it was entirely his own fault for waiting this long to ask about it, but it would hurt him anyway.

“Will.”

Will looked up, and Hannibal immediately took both his hands, his eyes shining.

“Do you truly want to be at the party, Will?” Hannibal asked, and Will realized he was delighted. More than delighted. He was ecstatic.

Will smiled.

“Yeah,” he said, “I do. I want to be a part of your life, Hannibal. Outside of just this. I think I’m ready, and I want to know more about the man you are around other people. If it’s alright with you.”

Hannibal lifted Will’s hands to his lips and pressed gentle kisses to his knuckles.

“Vilkas, I would be thrilled to have you there. I would like nothing more than to be able to have you by my side at the dinner. It’s no trouble at all. It will only require some minor adjustments, and I am more than pleased to do it to have you there.”

Will laughed softly. After everything, Hannibal was making it seem like this was a huge favor Will was doing for him. In some small way, this was a way he could repay Hannibal for everything he had done to this point. Even though Will had thought he was asking for a favor today.

“Then it’s settled,” Will said, feeling a pang of nerves at the thought of being around so many people like Hannibal. Fancy and refined. “I’ll be there. Can I come early again? Just so I’m not so nervous?”

Hannibal grinned.

“Of course,” he said, “whatever you want, vilkas. Wear that dark green shirt, with your black slacks. You will look wonderful.”

Will chuffed. He expected he would be under-dressed if he did that, but if it’s what Hannibal wanted he would do it. He probably didn’t own a suit nice enough to compare with the other people that would be there, so maybe Hannibal was trying to cut down on the level of embarrassment Will would be dealing with.

“You sure I won’t be an embarrassment to you?” Will asked, “I’m not exactly high society material.”

Hannibal pulled Will into a quick kiss, and Will could see how genuinely happy he was. Will had made him really, really happy.

“You will be the star of the evening, vilkas,” Hannibal said, “my most prized guest at the table. I am sure I will be unable to think of anything else the entire night, and I would be surprised if any of my guests do better.”

Will shook his head.

“You’re amazing,” he said, “just amazing. I’m beginning to wonder if *you’re* not going to embarrass *me* .”

Hannibal laughed softly and kissed Will again.

Chapter End Notes

Who's ready for a Doctor Lecter Dinner Party? *hesitant and uncomfortable cheers*
Whoo! Cannibalism! Rich people! Anxiety! Lies!
Sounds like my kind of party! *confetti*

Up next: Will gets ready for his big date.

73

Chapter Summary

Even more Beverly! And a lot of overthinking on Will's part.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I owe you a dinner.”

Beverly huffed a laugh, raising an eyebrow.

“I told you so,” she said, “did he jump for joy like a little kid?”

Will laughed and shook his head.

“He’s way too proper for something like that, but he did his own, high brow version of that. If you ever tell anyone I said that, I will deny it under oath.”

Beverly grinned.

“I’ll cash in on my dinner someday, just you wait. But I’ll give you some time to get a few dates in with your *beau*. It’s amazing any of us have time for a social life, the way Jack has us work.”

Will shrugged.

“I think I might be a special case, there,” he said, “Jack doesn’t want to work me too hard. He thinks I’m fragile.”

Beverly nodded in consideration.

“That would have been easier to believe before Doctor Lecter was attacked. Jack seems to think you’ve been cured since then. He talks about you like a secret weapon now, instead of a hair trigger landmine.”

That was news to Will. Both that Jack had ever talked about him like a landmine, and that he didn’t seem to think that way now. That was good, but also strange. Strange that he hadn’t said anything to either Will or Hannibal about it.

“Well, I guess he’s still nervous. I’m not exactly keen to make him treat me like I can take a beating, you know?”

Beverly smirked.

“Hey, you know your business better than I do. If I could get Jack off my back, I sure would. What are you up to today? At least until your date with your *beau*.”

Will shrugged again.

“I’m trying to wrap my head around the Ripper,” he said, “What else?”

The truth was that he was desperately trying to figure out when the Ripper had first noticed him, and why he had taken such an interest to begin with. Will hadn’t really entered the public eye yet when he was working the Hobbs case, so it was curious that he had caught anyone’s eye at that time. Someone had to have been watching very closely.

Maybe the Ripper had been interested in *Hobbs* from the beginning. Maybe he had known something about Hobbs they hadn’t. He had been watching, and Will had just happened to enter the frame at just the right moment.

Wasn’t his life just a comedy of errors.

“Oh, that’s great material to be wrapping yourself in before a big date,” Beverly chided, “what, is murder a common part of your guys’ foreplay or something?”

Will flushed and snorted. He shook his head, but he could see the teasing grin on Beverly’s face showing she meant it only as a joke.

Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad to take a break today. Just until after the dinner party. He needed to keep the two things separate, anyway.

—

Will actually took the time to iron his green shirt. He still worried he was going to be the only person not wearing something incredibly fancy and expensive, but he was trying to trust Hannibal about it.

He recognized it was a good choice, not that he would have expected anything less. He looked good in the color green, and it darkened the color of his eyes as well.

He wasn’t exactly comfortable looking at himself in the mirror as he got ready, feeling more nervous every time he saw himself. Because he knew he didn’t look nice enough to be at one of Hannibal’s parties.

But it was important to him that he start doing things like this. He wanted to be a part of Hannibal’s life. He wanted people to see them together, and know they belonged to each other.

He recognized part of it was the intense possessiveness he felt about Hannibal, not wanting anyone else to think he was available. Like with Alana, he wanted to stake his claim and show everyone that Hannibal loved him, so they didn’t have a chance. He didn’t want anyone to get close to Hannibal at all. Just him.

So it wasn't entirely honorable, and Will knew that was a bad thing. He shouldn't feel that way, and he certainly shouldn't give into those feelings. He should warn Hannibal about it, at the very least.

But he wasn't going to. At least not yet. He needed Hannibal. At least until he caught the Ripper, learned everything about them. Hannibal was his anchor, and his gauge. He needed him. Once he found the Ripper, and dealt with whatever happened then, he would have to deal with his feelings about Hannibal.

The dogs watched as Will paced around the house, nervous already. He wished he knew better what to expect. He didn't know any of Hannibal's fancy friends, and he didn't even know if Alana was going to be there. He might not know anyone but Hannibal, and he would be surrounded entirely by people he didn't know. People who didn't know anything about him other than what the internet said.

That was when the idea first settled in his mind.

He could use this. He could get the Ripper's attention through this as well. Make him pay attention. Really excite him to act.

It was wrong. He shouldn't. That would be like manipulating Hannibal. Using Hannibal as bait. Will didn't want Hannibal to be in danger.

But he could do it. He had an idea it would work. Hannibal might even agree to it willingly if Will just asked.

Will huffed and shook his head, grabbing his coat and heading out the door. Hannibal had said he could come early, so he was going to. He needed some time to settle into the idea of what the evening was going to be like. He could ask Hannibal questions about what to expect, and he could stop fretting over everything as much.

Hopefully.

If nothing else, he would be able to be around Hannibal, and soak in his calming presence. He would probably stop thinking about the Ripper at all once he was with Hannibal again. He needed to stop thinking about the Ripper when he was thinking about Hannibal. It was harder than it should be, in reality. He didn't know why that was.

It was snowing lightly, and Will was glad he was leaving now. If the weather got worse, he might have gotten stuck out in Wolf Trap. After getting Hannibal's hopes up, he would have had to cancel. He didn't want to do that.

Will wondered if it was harder for Hannibal to have parties in the winter, or if he wanted them more because they offered a distraction from his trauma. Maybe he needed to have this party, so he could forget his sorrow entirely for a night. Occupy his mind with pleasant things.

Will hoped tonight would go well. He wanted to make Hannibal happy. He wanted to be a part of his life in every way he would be allowed. He wanted to know everything about

Hannibal. Even the things Hannibal wanted to keep hidden.

Will wanted to consume him entirely.

Will sighed and switched on the radio, trying to lighten his own mood. Distract himself from such intense thoughts. He was just going to end up stressing himself out more if he kept that up.

Will tried to think of easier things, like what Hannibal would be wearing, and what kind of food he would be serving. The answer to both was: something fancy. That didn't stop him from imagining, though.

The meals Will had shared with Hannibal recently had been pretty simple in comparison to what they had started out as. Will wondered if that was because Hannibal had been trying to impress him at first, and now didn't feel that pressure, or because he had learned that Will had an appreciation for the more simple dishes and he was trying to accommodate that. Will wouldn't be surprised if it was a bit of both. It amused him to think that someone like Hannibal had ever felt he needed to try in order to impress someone like Will.

Will needed this night to go well. He wanted to show Hannibal he had made a good choice. He wanted to show that he could be the kind of person Hannibal deserved.

Lyin' Eyes by The Eagles played on the radio as he made his way through the gentle snow.

Chapter End Notes

It's a special kind of torment to see Will being insecure about deserving Hannibal, when he doesn't KNOW yet. XD Delicious.
Also love letting Beverly say things that are true, even though she means them as a joke. Just fun writer things.

Up next: Hannibal is giddy with excitement, and Will is trying not to be too nervous.

74

Chapter Summary

Hannibal is over the moon excited, and Will is nervous.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Will. Come with me."

Hannibal was basically giddy as he pulled Will down the hall. Will couldn't help his own smile in the face of Hannibal's excitement. It was cute, and acted like a balm on Will's frayed nerves after his day at work and the long session of fretting he had partaken in before coming. .

Hannibal pulled Will into the bathroom and immediately produced a small tub of something.

"You look wonderful, vilkas, but if I may, I would like to try this in your hair," Hannibal said.

Will huffed a laugh and shrugged.

"Sure. You know better than me," he said.

Hannibal's grin widened and before Will knew what was happening, Hannibal's hands were running through his hair. He had coated his hands in whatever was in the tub, and he was massaging it into Will's hair. It smelled like peaches and coconut.

Will closed his eyes, allowing himself to enjoy the sensation. He was determined to let this evening go well, and just enjoy it. He would be good, for Hannibal.

"It would be better if you treated your hair immediately after washing it," Hannibal said softly, "and work to repair the damage that has been done. For tonight, this will complete your glorious appearance."

Will huffed and opened his eyes. Hannibal turned him to face the mirror, and Will could hardly believe what he saw.

He had already started being able to look at himself in the mirror recently, but he didn't make a habit out of it. Now, he almost laughed aloud at what he saw, because he had never imagined he would look this good. Whatever Hannibal had put in his hair had defined the curls and made the frizz disappear. He usually didn't bother doing anything with his hair. He hadn't cared to. Now, he looked good. He looked like he might just belong in the life of someone like Hannibal.

“I look good,” he said, bewildered.

Hannibal huffed a soft laugh and pulled Will into a kiss.

“You are the most beautiful person I have ever had the privilege to meet, Will. And everyone Will see you as I do. Tonight, everyone will see you as you should be seen.”

Will flushed and shook his head, his eyes continually finding their way back to his reflection, where his hair looked better than he could ever remember it being.

“I’ll say it again. You would make a narcissist out of me, Hannibal, if I let you. I really shouldn’t let you.”

Hannibal pressed a kiss to Will’s jaw and then stepped away again.

“I really must finish preparations in the kitchen, but I am pleased with this. Come with me, and you can see the seating arrangements to be sure they are to your liking. If you require anything at all over the course of the evening, all you need do is ask.”

Will smiled, swallowing past a sudden rush of nerves. Seating arrangements, dinner, fancy people. This was going to be tedious. But he was going to get through it. For Hannibal.

“Let’s do this,” Will said, nodding.

Hannibal nodded and took his hand again, leading him down to the kitchen.

—

“Everything looks really good,” Will said, trying his best to stay out of the way. The people helping Hannibal in the kitchen were very polite, careful not to bump into him as they flitted about, offering him a polite smile if they happened to glance up as they passed. Will felt out of place, but he wasn’t uncomfortable.

“Why thank you, Will,” Hannibal said with a smile, “Come here and taste this for me.”

Will knew absolutely for sure that Hannibal didn’t need someone to taste it. He knew it was perfect, because everything he did was perfect. He was probably trying to give Will something to do so he wouldn’t just stand there worrying over what could possibly go wrong over the course of dinner.

Will appreciated that. He always did.

“This is a cornbread madeleine,” Hannibal said, lifting the bit of food up to Will’s lips, “They are to go with the Cajun fried frog legs.”

Will blushed a bit, but opened his mouth. Hannibal had never fed him like this before, but he could see that’s what Hannibal really wanted right now, and it wasn’t like he had any real reason to object. Hannibal smiled and placed the madeleine into his mouth, letting the tips of his fingers brush Will’s lips before pulling away.

Will chewed thoughtfully, noting how Hannibal traced the movements of his jaw and throat. It was delicious, of course, and he smiled.

“If I didn’t know better, I’d say you included a Cajun dish just for me,” he said after swallowing.

Hannibal’s eyes crinkled and he turned back to what he was doing.

“I had this planned entirely before I knew you were going to be in attendance,” he reminded Will, “but that dish was meant to make me feel as if you were here. I do hope you will enjoy it.”

Will huffed a laugh.

“You really are a hopeless romantic, you know that?”

Hannibal smiled and nodded.

“Only for you, Will,” he said, “I have never been this prone to such gestures before meeting you.”

Will doubted that. Hannibal did these things so easily, naturally. He would have bet every person Hannibal had ever been with before had been made to feel this special, this cared for. It seemed like Hannibal just did this out of habit more than anything.

“I’m not in the way in here?” Will asked, needing the reassurance despite himself. He hated how insecure and clingy he sounded, but there was no other way for it to sound.

Hannibal glanced up again, quickly sweeping the room to check, then shook his head.

“You are my partner, Will,” he reminded gently, “you are allowed anywhere in my home, whenever you like. We are all quite capable of avoiding a collision. Are you uncomfortable?”

Will shrugged.

“I just feel like I’m sure not helping, so I must be in the way somehow,” he admitted, recognizing the way that sounded, and what people would think upon hearing it, but knowing it was the truth.

Hannibal offered Will a reassuring smile.

“You are not in the way, and if you were, we would let you know. I promise.”

Will accepted that with a nod, though he still felt slightly on edge. He didn’t like how many people were in Hannibal’s kitchen, though they were polite and quiet as they worked. He wished it was just the two of them. But he wouldn’t likely get that tonight. At least not until after the dinner, and that would be hours away still.

“If you would like, you may spend this time in the study,” Hannibal offered, “You will be left to your own devices until I fetch you.”

Will considered that for a moment before he nodded with a sigh.

“Alright. That’s probably best. So I don’t start peeling off my skin before anyone else gets here.”

Hannibal smiled.

“Perfect. I will fetch you when it is time.”

Will matched Hannibal’s smile and gave him a quick kiss before he headed out of the kitchen.

Will made his way to the study and settled into one of the comfortable couches. He leaned his head back and sighed. It felt better in here, away from the bustle of preparations going on. It was calm and quiet. He just needed to get himself together and get through this night.

Will closed his eyes and focused on his breathing, counting each inhale and listening to the gentle rush of blood through his veins.

He could do this. It had been a long time since he’d had a panic attack. Probably a personal record. He could do this, and prove to Hannibal that they could do things together. He could be a part of Hannibal’s life.

How would the Ripper feel if Will started showing up in the public eye, even separately from his work with the FBI? Would he be jealous? Jealous of Hannibal and all the high society company? Could Will use this to draw him out of hiding?

Will felt a pang of guilt, feeling that was much too similar to using Hannibal as bait. Using himself as bait was fine, because he was the only one in danger. Even though he believed the Ripper had no intentions to hurt Hannibal, it still wouldn’t be right to use him that way and risk it.

But he was getting ahead of himself anyway. The first step before any of that became relevant was to make it through this dinner. If he freaked out tonight, it wouldn’t matter if he felt morally reprehensible for using Hannibal. He wouldn’t have the choice to use Hannibal if he wanted to.

Will must have drifted off, because the next thing he was aware of was Hannibal gently waking him.

Chapter End Notes

Happy birthday to this fic! Posting this a little early to have it be on the anniversary of the first chapter, and I might post another in a couple hours, just to celebrate. Haven't missed any updates all year, I think, which is a huge accomplishment for me. And I've nearly finished writing it. Many exciting things are happening right now.

Up next: Will does his very best to make a good impression.

Oh, and if anyone is wondering, the frog legs and madeleines are from Feeding Hannibal, and were a recipe that didn't make it into the show. But the actors loved it.

75

Chapter Summary

Will can't help himself

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Are you tired? You need not leave this room if you are too tired for the dinner. Or, better yet, you may use the bedroom.”

Will noted Hannibal’s use of *the* bedroom, rather than *my* bedroom. Just a small thing showing he truly considered them a unit. He was sharing his things with Will so naturally.

“No,” Will said, “I’m alright. I want to do this. This is important. Did I ruin my hair?”

Hannibal huffed a laugh and carded his fingers through Will’s hair once.

“There. You look fantastic. You will be the envy of all. Remember, you are allowed to leave at any moment if you become overwhelmed.”

Will nodded, taking a deep breath and steeling himself for the dinner to come. He could do this.

“Let’s do this.”

—

“Will, I confess I’m surprised to see you here,” Alana said, and Will couldn’t help but feel a stab of resentment. He pushed it away and smiled.

“It’s new for me,” he confessed, “But I hope we can all enjoy Hannibal’s food together tonight.”

Alana smiled, and Will allowed himself to meet her eyes, seeing that she felt uncomfortable with him there. She didn’t know how to act with him, and she was afraid of doing something wrong in front of Hannibal.

Will had been set to Hannibal’s right this time, and Alana was across from him. That of itself made him feel a bit better, just being put to Hannibal’s right. Hannibal had said Will really should have been seated at the other end, if they were to go by the rules, but he understood it would cause Will more distress to be that far away and surrounded by strangers.

Will wondered if Alana had been told about their relationship, or if she was only finding out tonight. He hadn't told her, feeling it wasn't really his place to do so and nervous with how new the development had been the last time he had seen her. He hadn't really thought about whether or not Hannibal would say anything.

"You look good," Alana said, trying so hard not to say anything that might upset him, "I think you look better now than I've seen you before."

Will smiled and couldn't help turning toward Hannibal a bit. While he felt it could be taken as a backhanded compliment, he decided Alana meant it genuinely. She really just didn't know how to deal with him.

"I've actually been getting that a lot recently," he said, "It seems like everyone has been noticing the difference."

Hannibal was clearly pleased.

"You have been making wonderful strides lately, and you should be proud," he said, "not many men have the dedication to come so far."

"Hannibal, dear," A woman called from a bit further down the table, "where did you meet your darling partner? You've been talking about him for ages, and I'm sure we would all like to know how he managed to land a catch like you."

Will flushed, and Hannibal took his hand to reassure him.

"As it happens, Will is a very good fisherman," Hannibal announced, letting them all see how infatuated he was with Will, "however, it is I who am fortunate to have captured him. From the moment I saw him I was taken by his beauty, and I have worked very hard to show him I am worth his time."

Will couldn't stop smiling, but he was overwhelmed. He had been worried about how Hannibal would answer questions about how they met, but Hannibal had managed to avoid it while at the same time using the chance to compliment Will in front of all these people.

Hannibal wasn't all that different here than he was when they were alone, though Will could see he had put on armor so he would not be vulnerable. He was not vulnerable with these people. Only Will, apparently.

The woman who had asked the question to begin with turned to Will with a smile. From the way she looked at him, Will guessed it wasn't often Hannibal acted this way about anyone, making him rethink his opinion of what Hannibal had said in the kitchen.

"And what do you do for work, Will?" she asked kindly, "It must be something interesting to have caught Hannibal's attention."

Will cleared his throat nervously, glancing at Alana and seeing she was upset. She was doing everything she could to hide how she felt, but she clearly felt she had been lied to or

deceived. Will felt bad about that at the same time as that darker part of himself was pleased she was hurt. And now she knew she couldn't have Hannibal. He belonged to Will.

"I teach at Quantico," Will said, "And I consult on a few cases with the FBI. Actually, Hannibal came on to help us with the Shrike case a while back."

Hannibal grinned like the cat who got the cream, pleased by everything Will had said. Will couldn't help giving him an exasperated glance and rolling his eyes.

"I think I read about you online," the man sitting beside the woman said, "you've been out of the field for a while, by the looks of it, but you came back."

Will saw the way Hannibal's jaw tensed, feeling it was rude and dangerous for the man to bring this up. Will wasn't bothered, though, thinking instead that he might be able to use this to his advantage.

"That's right," he said, "I had some personal matters to attend to, and I didn't have as much time as I do now. With certain cases, I need to be much more involved."

Hannibal's tension eased as Will spoke, and he returned to his neutral, pleased expression. The rest of the table murmured softly, likely speculating about what he had meant and which cases he was currently working on.

"I guess I was right when I said you're Hannibal's kind of thing," Alana said, trying not to show how tense she felt, "I just didn't realize exactly how right I was."

Will smiled gratefully to her, glad she was showing them both support even if she didn't exactly feel it. That Hannibal would have put her in this position was a surprise to him, and he thought they would have to address that at some point.

Just not yet.

"Well, I for one couldn't be more pleased for the both of you," the woman from before said, "Hannibal had been a bachelor for far too long, and I was beginning to think he was just too good for anyone."

Will huffed a laugh and took a sip of his wine.

"I think he really is," he told her, "And I can't hardly believe he finds me worth his time."

A ripple of laughter went around the table, though Alana only smiled tersely. Will was feeling less nervous now, having found it easier than he had expected to ingratiate himself into this kind of social scene. It wasn't as tedious as he had expected, though he could feel his social energy was draining quickly. He wasn't sure he would be able to last through all of dinner.

Will felt a huge amount of gratitude to Hannibal for the way he was always aware of Will's needs, especially when he was in this dining room. The lights and colors were still the way he had changed them for the dinner with Alana, and Will didn't feel at all intimidated by the space despite the fact that he was much closer to these strangers than he usually would be.

Will was also curious about the centerpiece, and wondered if Hannibal had made it with him in mind, just like the frog legs. It had some dark and iridescent feathers, and a bird skull in a tightly woven nest of sticks. It was strange in the way Will had come to expect from Hannibal's decor, and somehow didn't seem inappropriate for this setting.

"Are you working on the case of the Chesapeake Ripper?" The man from before asked, clearly interested in Will's work now that he knew what it was, "I've heard they are keeping a tight lid on things regarding it, and though we know Abel Gideon surely wasn't him, they won't say much else."

It was as if this guy knew exactly what to ask for Will to get what he wanted. Will almost smiled, but managed to hold back. It wouldn't be the best look for him if he started grinning whenever the Ripper was brought up. Not in these situations.

"That's one of the cases I'm working on," he said, "and we have very good reason for keeping quiet on it, but of course that means I can't tell you anything you haven't read online."

While he could tell they were disappointed, he also felt that they found him interesting. They were going to be talking about him, and their curious dinner in his company, for days at least after they left here tonight. That was good. He would be in the public eye more than he had dared hope for from Freddie Lounds alone.

And something told him this was the kind of talk that would reach the ears of the Ripper more surely than anything else. He was starting to get a real feel for who the Ripper was, and he thought these were the social circles he would be attuned to. At least he hoped so.

"That's a shame," the woman said, "I find all that very interesting, and I'm always curious to learn what's going on right around us. It's frightening to think someone is out there killing people, and we have no idea who it is."

Will did smile, then, and looked back down at his food. This was a calculated move, because he thought he could make them think he was far closer to finding the Ripper than he really was. By not saying anything, they would begin to wonder, and fill in the blanks in their own head.

If word got back to the Ripper that Will Graham had an idea who he was, but he wasn't showing up on his front step with a swat team, that might just encourage him to show his face. Will could hope.

They dropped the subject of the Ripper for the time being, and conversation turned much more casual and social. Will talked with Alana about the dogs, and Hannibal regaled them all with psychiatrist anecdotes Will wasn't sure he entirely believed.

It was strangely normal, all things considered.

That didn't stop Will from wearing down. He could feel his energy draining, and he was trying to portion it out. That was hard, because there were a lot of people here, and most of

them had at least part of their focus on him through the whole thing. He was the new curiosity, and they were all interested. He understood why, even though he didn't like it.

When the woman sitting by his elbow brushed his arm by accident, he flinched so violently he nearly knocked his entire plate off the table. It clattered loudly, and his heart nearly stopped.

All eyes were on him in an instant, and he felt his chest grow tight with anxiety. He ducked his head and fixed his eyes on his hands, feeling his heart beating painfully in his chest.

He should have known better. This had been a bad idea. He couldn't do this. He wasn't ready. He was still broken. He may never be fixed. Never be good enough for Hannibal.

Hannibal's hand was on his in an instant, and Will looked up into his warm brown eyes. He immediately felt his heart slow, and his chest loosened. Not entirely, but enough so he didn't feel he was about to die.

"If you need a moment, you may have it," Hannibal said to him softly, "anything you wish."

Will nodded, smiling wanly.

"I guess I just have bad things on my mind," he said, offering an apologetic glance around the table, "Makes me jumpy."

There were murmurs of agreement, the company apparently finding his excuse satisfactory. They might even see him as some kind of hero, if they didn't insist on believing everything Freddie Lounds posted.

Will made his excuses only a minute later and went into the study to calm down. He wasn't on the verge of panic, but he definitely needed to have a minute to himself. He was using a lot of energy to just be around them, and then he was using them in his game. That was going to be even more wearing on him, and it was all his own fault.

But he could do this. He could get through this night without having a panic attack. He had to finish what he had started. That included the seeds he had started to plant in order to draw out the Ripper. He had crossed that line, and now he had to own up to it.

It occurred to him that his obsession with Hannibal, rivaling his determination to find the Ripper, might only be matched by the Ripper's obsession with Will himself. The Ripper thought he was in love with Will, in some way or another. Maybe they were a better match than Will and Hannibal were for each other. Because only the Ripper could entirely rise up to the challenge of Will's complete obsession.

When Will found the Ripper, would he become overwhelmed with the Ripper's feelings, and end up obsessed with the Ripper as well? Would that reflected obsession overcome his feelings for Hannibal? Would the Ripper end up taking Will away from Hannibal like that?

As much as Will loved Hannibal, he couldn't be entirely sure how it would play out. He knew better than to expect anything. And he was so wrapped up in the mind of the Ripper

already, he couldn’t be sure he would be able to fend off those kinds of things.

Will tried to push those thoughts away, turning back and reentering the fray. He had a play to finish in this game he had started. He had a few more seeds to plant before he could see the harvest.

Chapter End Notes

Happy birthday to this fic. Two for one, this time around, to celebrate. Because I can't help myself. XD

Up next: Jack has another scene for Will, and Will knows he's on borrowed time.

76

Chapter Summary

Will has put some distance between himself and Hannibal in preparation for what might happen next.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal's back hit the bedroom door and knocked a rush of air from his lungs. Will was immediately on him, kissing him like he couldn't breathe without him. Will wanted to consume him entirely. Keep Hannibal with him no matter what happened with the Ripper.

Hannibal's hands were on him, then, pulling him closer with the same desperation.

"You were using them all," Hannibal breathed between hungry kisses, "All my guests are pieces in your game to catch the Ripper."

He was smiling, and clearly not upset by the idea that Will would do such a thing. His fingers began working on the buttons of Will's shirt, and he was reciprocating each heated kiss.

Despite everything Will had been trying to do to keep them separate, images of the Ripper kills flooded his mind and made him feel even more bold. He had sown seeds of ideas in the guests all night, making them think he was closer to catching the Ripper than he was. Giving them things to talk about. Chumming the waters.

"Things are going to start happening fast," he said, sliding his hands into Hannibal's hair and hauling him toward the bed, "I'm making sure of it. I don't know exactly how it's going to go down, but I know something is sure to happen fast."

Hannibal pivoted, as graceful as a dancer even now, and pulled them both down onto the bed with Will above him. He looked good enough to eat, his hair disheveled and his eyes shining with adoration.

"You are playing a dangerous game, Vilkas," Hannibal said, his accent thick, "You may find yourself consumed by your cannibal."

Will ducked down and kissed Hannibal again, his veins thrumming with energy and excitement. He felt as if the whole world was holding its breath, waiting for something to happen. This moment existed outside of time, and no God could see them here. There was no power higher than the two of them.

“You ought to be more worried about yourself,” Will said, “I’m fixin’ to eat you up before he gets a chance to get his teeth in me.”

Hannibal pushed Will’s shirt off over his shoulders, and Will belatedly got to work on the buttons of Hannibal’s vest.

“To be devoured by you would be the highest honor, Vilkas,” Hannibal said, the words as solemn as a promise.

—

Will let out a breath as he reloaded and looked at the target. His aim was getting better, and the feel of Lirette’s gun in his hand was somehow comfortable in a way his own gun never had been.

Will hadn’t told Hannibal the gun had arrived. He hadn’t told him he had bought a few boxes of ammunition for it. He hadn’t told Hannibal he planned to practice shooting. If Hannibal had noticed any of those things on his own, he hadn’t said anything. It seemed like they didn’t talk about these things anymore. Maybe, if they both survived whatever the Ripper was going to do, they would talk about everything again. Will wanted to go back to that, but he knew it wouldn’t happen until the Ripper was dealt with in one way or another.

He wasn’t at the range to prepare to shoot the Ripper, or anything of the sort. It was just a way he was trying to clear his head. He didn’t want to be overwhelmed by his own thoughts when the Ripper finally showed up. He felt closer to Lirette, holding his gun like this, and Lirette had always helped him sort through his whirling thoughts.

Lirette should have been here for him, now. He needed someone like Lirette, who wouldn’t let him get away with stupid plans. Like drawing out the Ripper without knowing if he could do what needed to be done. Lirette would have knocked some sense into him by now, told him with no uncertain terms that he was being a certified idiot, and he needed to stop it.

This was the worst possible time for Lirette to be out of reach. Will didn’t even trust *Hannibal* to stop him from making a huge mistake. Hannibal was clearly as invested in seeing this play out as Will was in being a part of it. Despite all his promises to be Will’s gauge for reality and morality, Will recognized that he wasn’t the right person for that role. Hannibal was too curious to see what would happen, and he wouldn’t stop Will until he had already gone past the point of no return.

It wasn’t fair that Lirette was gone.

“I heard I might find you down here.”

Will turned to see Beverly, and he smiled a bit. He felt a little better just for seeing her, a friendly face in his moment of grief. A guiding star when he was lost.

“Just getting some practice time in while I’m not flooded with work,” he said, “what can I do for you?”

Beverly was smiling in a way that he had now learned was characteristic, something between a grin and a smirk. It was a kind look all the same, and he liked her all the more for the expression.

“Well, don’t get too comfortable. I think your break is over. Jack says we have another Ripper scene. You’ve been expecting it, and we're all surprised it took this long, since he usually works fast. If this is him, we’ve got a short window to catch him. But I think you’re close, right?”

Will nodded, unloading the gun and sliding it back into the holster it had been sent with. He was excited to see what they had this time, but he was afraid of the game coming to an end. He had a premonition it wouldn’t be pretty, wouldn’t be neat or clean, and he didn’t know who would come out the other side victorious.

This could be the beginning of the end for someone.

“Yeah, I’m close. Let’s go see what the Ripper has to say.”

—

“Well, I certainly didn’t expect to see you again,” Chilton said, making Will cringe, “after you made such a fool of yourself at the press conference. You told everyone Gideon was the Ripper, but now you’ve shown everyone that was far from the truth.”

Will laughed, and he could see the surprise in Chilton’s face at the sound. Will shouldn’t have dared to laugh at him. But he did. He dared, because it was hilarious. Will wasn’t afraid of him anymore.

“The only person who was made a fool was you, Doctor Chilton,” he said, “you were the one who made that ridiculous claim to begin with. Anyone who was stupid enough to believe you must feel like a fool, but *we* certainly aren’t. We laid a trap, and it worked. Anyone with any brains can see that, and anyone else isn’t worth thinking about.”

Chilton’s face grew red with indignation. Will honestly didn’t understand why he was here. Unless he had just come to hash this out with Jack and himself, which wasn’t entirely out of the question. Maybe he had wanted to have another go at Will, without Hannibal there to defend him. Whatever the case, Will wasn’t in the mood to let him have his way.

“Oh,” Will said with a smile, patronizing and cruel, “I see. People *did* realize who the real fool is. You’ve had your competence questioned. I guess they’re just finally figuring out what I found out years ago. You’re not fit for your job. You’re not fit for any job. You’re not fit for a working circulatory system.”

Beverly huffed a laugh from behind Will, but Jack had just walked in to hear this and was clearly unhappy to have done so. He didn’t like what Will had just said, and was clearly stressed about other things as well. Will didn’t regret anything, though.

“Will, please,” Jack said, exasperated, “Doctor Chilton is here to help.”

“Oh?” Will asked, turning to face Jack, “I thought he already had helped us. I can’t imagine what his particular set of skills could possibly do for us now.”

Jack scowled. Will’s new attitude was clearly not amusing to him.

“He *is* the one who recognized the pattern of the Ripper in Gideon’s work,” Jack said

Will chuffed.

“Of course he recognized it!” he snapped, unable to help himself, “he’s the one who put it into Gideon’s head in the first place. All he’s good for is making a mess. I’m not really in the mood to clean one up today, are you?”

Beverly stepped forward, then, clearly recognizing Will was getting worked up and they wouldn’t get anything done this way. She leveled Will with a stern look that instantly chastised him. It reminded him of Lirette, in all honesty, and that sobered him quick. Then, she turned to Jack and put her hands on her hips.

“Will shouldn’t have to work with Doctor Chilton,” she said bluntly, “he should get out of here until Will is done. If you still want his help then, you can let him have his look. Clearly they can’t work together.”

Jack sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. He should have seen this coming, honestly, and kept Chilton away from Will. He should have known better. He was getting too comfortable with Will being alright. He was taking risks with him.

“Fine. Doctor Chilton, you stay away until Will is done. Don’t talk to him. Don’t even look at him. I guess he’s in a bad mood. Will, go on in and have a look.”

Will hated that. He hated being treated like a rabid dog, as if at any moment he might snap and bite someone.

Not that he could necessarily blame them. He did find the idea of sinking his teeth into Chilton until he could taste blood on his tongue far too satisfying. He liked the idea of Chilton being surprised by his action even more. He would like to see the pain and shock on Chilton’s face as he realized he had been right about Will being dangerous, but he had been wrong about everything else.

It didn’t matter. Soon, maybe nothing would matter. Will turned and headed into the scene.

The only thing that mattered right now was the Ripper. If he could see the Ripper through this, and finally find him. If the Ripper would tell him what he needed to know to finally put it all together and find him.

Will needed to see the Ripper’s design. He needed to find that last part of himself he thought he had lost all those years ago, and he was sure this was the way to do it. If he could do this, find the Ripper and understand him entirely, Will thought he could put himself completely back together.

This was what Hannibal had promised he would stop.

But Will had been hiding it from him. Will hadn't let him, and he wasn't sure Hannibal *would* have stopped him before now. They were a perfect match in so many ways, and that didn't seem to be a good thing in this case. He recognized that they were dangerous, because neither of them would control the other. When Will was starting to be dangerous, Hannibal would just watch him do what he wanted.

Will closed his eyes and shook his head, trying to dispel thoughts of Hannibal right now. Depending on how this went, he might not see Hannibal again.

Freddie Lounds had done her job, writing articles about Will and speculating that he knew more than he was letting on. Showing pictures of him at crime scenes that didn't belong to the Ripper, and basically just putting him in the center of everything. In the eye of the storm. If the Ripper was watching, all he saw was Will. That could be why they had a scene here today. Will's plan had worked, as ill-advised as it might have been. The Ripper wanted Will to look at him in return.

He opened his eyes and looked at the scene.

Chapter End Notes

Cliffhanger my beloved. At least we only have five days to wait for the next chapter. Any ideas what Will is going to see?

Up next: Will faces the harsh reality

Oh yeah. Happy Ides of March, as well. Sort of a perfect day for a little murder~

77

Chapter Summary

The moment you've all been waiting for!

Chapter Notes

I promised I would leave a warning at the beginning of this chapter, because some of you have been really enjoying the fluff and romance of the fic up to now, and this is where the real problems truly start. So please be aware of that.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The first thing Will noticed was the scattering of bullets all over the floor. If he were to step on them, he imagined it would be like a scene from a cartoon where he would slip and slide all over them like marbles. He wondered why the Ripper would do it like that. It seemed like a waste. Not that the Ripper was known to use bullets or guns. He preferred to use knives, scalpels in particular.

When Will saw the body, he understood. He understood more than he wanted to.

Freddie Lounds had her ankles bound, chained to the wall. She looked like she had been trying to escape, crawl away from where the chain was bolted to the wall. It was exactly the way Steven Walters had chained Will when he had misbehaved. Something no one should know about.

She couldn’t have been here for very long. Someone would have told Will if she had been missing. But she looked unhealthy, like she had suffered. Will thought she must have been tortured in some way before she had died.

He was *glad* .

She had caused enough hurt. She had earned this. She had deserved to die, and to know she had brought it upon herself. He had wanted to do this to her himself. As much as he had used her for his own purposes, he had wanted her to die this way. She had been a necessary evil, but evil all the same.

But anyone could have guessed he felt that way. She had been making a public spectacle of his pain for months, and it wouldn’t be a huge leap to think he was upset about it.

Freddie's heart had been removed, and her chest left open so her ribs were exposed. The heart lay just out of reach of her grasping fingers, placed on a platter that Will had no doubt was literally made of silver. Rose petals pooled like blood underneath the organ, and Will imagined he could smell the combination of blood and perfume from the flowers. There were lights all around, shining directly onto Freddie and illuminating her like a display at an art gallery. It showed that her ribs held nothing within her chest, her lungs having been removed as well.

Her eyes, a startlingly bright shade of blue, stared directly at Will. For the briefest moment, he thought she must still be alive, because those eyes were far too bright. They should have clouded within two hours of her death. But then he understood, because they weren't quite the right shade of blue either.

The Ripper had painted her eyes to look this way. To be this color. To make her look alive as much as she could. To make her stare directly at whoever stood right here.

There was no blood here, as there had been at the previous scene. Will guessed she had been drained before all of this had been done. He didn't see any lividity on her body to betray if she had been in any other position before this one, and it would explain the grey coloring her skin had taken on.

Feathers were scattered around her body, bright colors like from pet birds, and Will could see a few in the hollow of her chest behind her ribs. As if a bird had escaped from there.

The Ripper knew *all about* Will.

And Will finally knew why.

Will turned away from the scene sharply, feeling his chest grow tight. His heart pounded hard, beating fast as if it could run away and escape the truth he had just realized. He couldn't breathe, and he didn't think there was any way to fix any of it. None of his usual mechanisms were safe. Not anymore. Hannibal lurked behind them all.

Hannibal had done this. Hannibal had *been* doing this. Hannibal had been lying to him all along. Hannibal was the Ripper, and he had been hiding it from Will. He had been manipulating him.

Cassie Boyle. Jacob Foltz. And now Freddie Lounds. Hannibal had killed them all *for* Will. Maybe more people Will didn't know about. Will hadn't asked for this.

Had he?

Will remembered telling Hannibal who he would hurt if he could. Hannibal had asked. Will had given him two names. Freddie and Chilton. Hannibal had done this because Will had told him he wanted her to be hurt. To know how he had felt.

Hannibal had done this.

Will must have been stupid to not realize. Hannibal must have been counting on that. Hannibal had been using Will's blindness against him to hide the truth. Hannibal had been *using* him. Hannibal had been conditioning Will, offering him methods of calming that were so tied up in violence and death that now Will couldn't even tell the difference between peace and oblivion. All his reliable sources of comfort had been designed by Hannibal, and so were steeped in lies and betrayal.

Will fell to his knees, his muscles growing weak from lack of oxygen. He couldn't breathe, and tears were streaming from his eyes. He wasn't safe here. He wasn't safe anywhere.

Hannibal had done this.

Will's vision went black.

—

"We had to sedate him. He was in a state of complete panic. I've never seen him that bad. Every time he starts to come to, he starts hyperventilating or he can't breathe at all. I thought he was getting better. You both *told* me he was getting better. He told me he could handle this."

Will opened his eyes to see Jack, on the phone. He could guess who he was talking to.

Will was in a hospital bed, and his mind swam with memories, associations he would rather not be making right now. He was hooked up to the monitors and he could hear his heartbeat pinging. He noticed it was a little fast, had probably sped up a little the moment he had woken up. He could remember waking a few other times, each time being choked by the realizations he had made at the crime scene. A flurry of activity, and darkness again as he was put back under with drugs.

This time, he could think more rationally.

"Hang up the phone," Will croaked, his throat dry.

Jack startled and turned to face him. He kept the phone to his ear, though, and Will frowned. He cleared his throat and repeated himself.

"Hang up, Jack," he said, "I know who you're talking to, and I don't want you to."

Jack ended the call and shoved his phone into his pocket, concern creasing his brow as he looked at Will.

"You had better tell me what's going on, or you're off the case for good," Jack said, absurdly making that sound like a threat, "I'm already taking you out of the field whether you like it or not. But I need you to be completely honest with me now."

Will laughed bitterly.

"I'll tell you what you need to know," he said, a lie as blatant as any he had ever said, "but I want to go home as soon as I'm done. I'm done with it. All of it. At least for a while. I don't

want you to contact me, and I don't want you to ask me to help. I need a break. A real one."

Jack wasn't happy, but he didn't object. He didn't say anything, likely knowing he wouldn't be able to stop himself from trying to argue if he talked.

Will nodded, grateful for at least that much forethought.

"The Ripper is trying to get to me, Jack," he said, knowing that would convince him to let this happen, "I didn't tell you before, because I knew you would have to take me off the case, and I wanted to find him. But now, I know I can't keep doing that. The Ripper is trying to get to me. He's looked into my past, and he knows all of it. The only way I can stay safe now is to stop. To hide from him."

Jack waited, likely knowing Will had more to say.

"If you track those bullets from the scene, you'll probably find that I just bought them the other day. He took them from my house to put them there. He wanted me to know he knows I've been to the range to practice. He wants me to know that he's been to my house. He wants me to feel like I'm not safe."

"You *are* safe," Jack said. He was frustrated and angry, but his anger wasn't directed at Will this time. At least not yet. "I can keep you safe. If I had known, I could have kept you safe all along. You should have told me before."

Will shook his head.

"You can't do anything against him, Jack, and I've known that for a while now too. If he wants to do something, he will. You can't stop him. The only person who might be able to stop him is me, and I need some time to figure out how. I need you to give me some time, and I'll figure out how to end this."

Jack stared at Will for a long time, silent and worried. Will knew Jack was at war with himself over what to do. On the one hand, he had genuinely grown to care what happened to Will, beyond just his usefulness as a tool for the FBI. On the other, he still felt obligated to do everything in his power to catch bad guys and put them behind bars. This was probably the first time he felt truly conflicted about putting Will in a difficult position, when he was entirely willing.

Will belatedly realized what Hannibal had been doing. Every time he had said anything negative or disparaging about Jack when they were talking, he had been trying to drive a wedge between Will and the people who could help him if he decided to put Hannibal in jail when he realized. Hannibal had been trying to alienate Will from the people in his life he could trust and go to with his problems.

It was a miracle he had never tried that with Lirette. Maybe he had only refrained from doing so because Lirette had been states away, and was hard for Will to reach. Maybe he just hadn't had a chance to try before Lirette had died.

Will's eyes filled with tears again and he turned away from Jack.

“Believe me or not, Jack,” he said, careful to keep his voice even despite the emotion trying to choke him, “but let me go home, please. I want to go home.”

Jack sighed softly, and Will heard him walk towards the door.

“Alright. At least for today, you can go home. I’ll be in touch, to make sure you’re alright and to see if you have any ideas yet. I’m not going to abandon you, Will, and I want you to know you’re not alone in this.”

Jack left, presumably to get Will a set of clothes to get into once he got out of the paper hospital gown. And to arrange for his release.

Jack didn’t understand that Will *was* alone. He was more alone than he ever had been before. Even in that basement where Steve Walters had kept him, Will had been able to hold onto the hope of rescue, the idea of his father and the police being out there looking for him. Knowing he had somewhere to go when it was over.

Now, Will had nowhere to go, no one to go to. His dad was long dead, Lirette cooling in his grave, and no one else was in the position to help. Will had friends, sure, but no one who would believe him about this and no one who had the ability to help him out of this mess.

No one could fix this mess.

Will had to save himself. Again.

He just wasn’t sure he could.

Chapter End Notes

There we have it. Will knows, and he's not taking it well. Could be worse, though. Right?

Up next: Will realizes just how deep this hurt goes, and he grasps at any chance to have comfort.

78

Chapter Summary

Will tries to find a source of comfort that doesn't involve Hannibal.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will wandered his house, tears streaming steadily from his eyes. The dogs followed, bewildered as Will desperately searched for any place that felt safe. Whenever his chest closed off, making his vision blur from lack of oxygen, he would fall to his knees and allow the dogs to comfort him as much as they could. It wasn't much, because there was nothing in his life that Hannibal had not touched, making his own in a way Will didn't know if he would ever be able to forgive.

Hannibal had infiltrated every part of Will's life. Will had never let anyone that close. No one had ever gotten close at all. Even Lirette had never gotten so close to Will, been so trusted and invited in. Hannibal was under Will's skin, in the very air in the house, in the hum of the wind outside. Hannibal had been invited to share Will's house and body. Hannibal was in everything, because he was in Will's mind, anchored in his chest.

Will had been such a fool for letting him in. For letting a predator in and showing it his vulnerable underbelly.

Because the Ripper was a predator above all else. Will had thought he was an artist above all else, but he had been wrong. The Ripper was an endurance hunter. Patient, planning, stalking. All this time, he had been tracking Will, following the scent of his wounded mind. The bloodtrail of his broken psyche.

Will should have seen it. He should have protected himself against just such a predator. He should never have let someone like Hannibal get close to him.

"Please, God," Will choked, bitter that Hannibal had managed to drive him to prayer after everything, "help me. I can't do this alone."

Will glanced out the window, and it was like a flashbulb in his mind.

There was one place Hannibal had not been. A place he had not touched. One place Will could go to escape the images like phantoms of Hannibal in his life. One place Will could be safe from Hannibal's touch.

Will gathered a sleeping bag and blanket, a pillow and his shotgun. He whistled for the dogs, and headed out to the barn. He would have to take a couple trips to set it up properly so he

wouldn't freeze to death, the ground now covered in a layer of snow. But he would do it. He had to. Nowhere else was safe.

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"Will, it's good to hear from you. How are you doing?"

Will tried to smile, as if that alone would keep Macy from hearing the grief and fear in his voice. He sobbed involuntarily, and he heard Macy freeze on the other end.

"Will, what's wrong, cher?" she asked, sounding concerned and slightly frightened, "are you alright?"

Will tried to steady his breathing, and he managed to calm enough to speak.

"It's Hannibal," he said, "I can't even look at him anymore. He's been lying to me this whole time, and I don't know if I can ever forgive him for it."

Macy let out a string of cajun curses that reminded Will of Lirette so strongly his heart ached. He leaned back against the wall of the barn, wishing he wasn't so alone here. Wishing there was anyone he could trust to be with him right now.

"Men are the worst," Macy spat, "other than you, of course. What did he do, hon? Tell me, and I'll cut his brake lines. I'll burn his house down. Shit. I'll break his kneecaps if you say the word. What did he do?"

Will sobbed harder, Winston laying in his lap in an attempt to give him some level of comfort, no matter how small.

He couldn't tell her. He couldn't. He couldn't tell anyone. Hannibal had made sure of that. Hannibal, the bastard, had made it so Will had no one he could talk to. No one he could tell about this.

"I can't tell you," Will confessed, feeling the words like acid on his tongue, "but I thought I loved him, Macy. I thought he loved me. I was so sure. He made a fool of me, and he didn't even have the decency to tell me he'd done it. He waited 'till I found out."

Macy sighed.

"Oh, sweetheart," she said sadly, "I know you love him. You still do. If you didn't love him no more, you wouldn't be hurting so much. And you love him because he was good for you. You got to feeling like you could be more, and have more, because he was with you. I could see it in the way you looked at him. He was everything to you. He probably still is. And he probably will be for a while to come. But you don't need him anymore, Will."

Will huffed, sinking his hand into Winston's fur and trying to find comfort in his softness and warmth. It didn't help much, even when Max limped over and lay down against Will's side. He was sure nothing would ever make him feel better again. He had been thrust back into that basement in his mind, and he could never escape. Even were someone to offer to help him

break free again, he would never trust them again. He would react like an abused dog, snapping at gestures of kindness for fear of being hurt again.

“Because you know that you can do anything you set your mind to,” Macy said sternly, “pa told you that all the time before, but you never believed it until Hannibal. Now, you believe it, and you better keep believing it even if he’s not there for you. Because you are the one with the power here, Will, and you know it.”

That idea settled in Will’s mind like a stone sinking into a riverbed, heavy and dark. He didn’t particularly like it, but it did lend to some feeling of control.

Will *was* in control. For once in his life, he was actually in control. Despite everything Hannibal had done to him, to take away his options, Hannibal had not been able to take the control from him. Will could see it.

That was probably why he had waited this long to let Will know the truth. He had been clinging to his sense of control, knowing Will would have all the power the moment the truth came out.

Will got to choose what happened next, no matter what Hannibal did or wanted.

“Yeah,” Will said through his tears, “I know it. And I guess I needed to hear it again. Sorry for putting that on you. I know you’re not exactly in high cotton yourself at the moment.”

Macy huffed, and Will could tell she was smiling, though she was still worried about him.

“I’m doing just fine,” she said, “I’m certainly no worse off without a man like Jason, and I have a lot of my pa left over to keep with me. I’ll tell you again, if there’s anything you want from here, you just let me know.”

A thought occurred to Will, and he did manage a smile. It was a long shot, but he was curious. It was another thing he could control. Another thing Hannibal had not touched. Something he could cling to while he dealt with what Hannibal had done.

“You remember that chair?” he asked, “they usually kept it in the corner of the living room, and just stacked stuff on it. The one with the green upholstery and the carved armrests?”

Macy laughed softly.

“‘Course I remember your chair, Will,” she said, “Pa always told me he kept it around in case you came callin’. It’s right here. I kep wondering if you might want it, but I didn’t ask because I thought it might be silly. Do you?”

Will closed his eyes, a plan of action solidifying in his mind. Just the thought of control helped him to feel more steady, though no less hurt.

“Yeah,” he said, “I’d like that. If it’s not too much trouble.”

“Never too much trouble for you, Will,” Macy said, “I’ll find a way to get it to you, just you wait. Even if I have to drive it all the way to Virginia from here. It’s been your chair since

before I was born. I'm surprised it's still in the shape of a chair, but it's yours. You deal with what you have to, and I'll do my part. Don't let anyone bully you. If you need my help, just call."

Will nodded to himself.

He wasn't entirely alone. He couldn't bring Macy into this mess, but he didn't have to be alone. She was there to support him, and he could lean on her if he needed it.

"I'll do right by myself," Will promised, "and I'll try to do your pa proud."

"Mine *and* yours," Macy said, "you always do, you know. Gotta go, but talk to you later. Keep me in the loop."

"Will do. Thanks."

They ended the call, and Will sighed. That had helped him figure out where he stood exactly, and Macy had managed to pull him out of his spiral. Just like Lirette usually had.

Things were never going to be exactly alright again. Will wasn't deluded into believing they would be. Hannibal had ruined what they had built, and it wouldn't ever come back together the way Will wished they would. Things were broken, and wouldn't be fixed. Even if some of it could be mended, things would be different forever.

Max whined softly, and Will smoothed a hand over his fur to offer some comfort. The rest of the pack settled in around his legs and feet, and he actually did start to feel better.

Will wasn't sure he would survive this. Maybe that was just fine.

Chapter End Notes

So, no Hannibal this chapter. Will needed a moment before he faced the monster. But the monster won't stay in the shadows for long. Don't worry. (well, maybe worry a little)

Up next: Will gets a visitor, and he recognizes that Hannibal is right about one thing.

79

Chapter Summary

Will confronts a demon or two.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will heard the approach of a car, and the dogs stirred excitedly. He knew who it was. There was really only one person he could be expecting right now.

Will heaved himself up from his makeshift bed and grabbed his shotgun. He motioned for the dogs to stay put and opened the big barn door enough to slip out, closing it behind him so the dogs would stay.

Hannibal had halted on his way towards the house, staring at Will in surprise and bewilderment. Will also thought he looked strangely vulnerable, though he wasn't sure he could trust himself on that count anymore. He didn't know if anything he thought he knew about Hannibal had been true.

"Will," Hannibal said, taking a step towards the barn and spreading his gloved hands, "Are you alright? Jack said you were in a poor state. I expected to hear from you."

Will raised the shotgun and set it into place at his shoulder, aiming for the knot of Hannibal's stupid silk tie. Hannibal halted once more, his expression shifting with indecision.

"Of course you did," Will said calmly, "You thought I would rather run right to you than be alone after figuring out what you did."

Hannibal frowned.

"Will, I fear it's not good for you to be alone right now," he said, "You are going through something difficult, and you should have some support."

Will barked a laugh, bitter and cynical.

"You made damn sure I'd be alone right now, though, didn't you?" he spat, "If I didn't come running to you, you didn't want me to have anywhere else to go. No support. Just sand."

Hannibal's eyes were glistening with the beginnings of tears, but he set his jaw stubbornly. Will could see he certainly wasn't here to apologize. In Hannibal's mind, he hadn't done anything wrong.

“Did you just want to wait until you were sure I was in love with you? Until you knew I wouldn’t be able to turn you in? Because I’ve been dependent on you for a long time, so I can’t quite figure what it was.”

Hannibal took a deep breath, a cloud forming before his face and obscuring his features for a moment. Not that it made much of a difference. His face wasn’t honest.

“You don’t want to shoot me, Will,” he said, and he sounded commanding, like he was in control.

Will pulled back the hammers, watching as the soft click made Hannibal flinch. The image of the bullets scattered across the floor came to mind, and Will grimaced.

“Maybe not, but I know for sure *you* don’t want me to shoot you. You would want me to use my hands. You would want it to be intimate if I chose to kill you. What in heaven or hell makes you think I would give you what you want right now?”

Hannibal eyed the gun warily, clearly realizing he was in very real danger here. Even Will wasn’t sure if he really meant to shoot Hannibal. He just knew he needed to hold onto as much control as he could. He couldn’t let Hannibal get a hand up on him.

Hannibal might not die if Will did shoot him at this range. It was buckshot, and Hannibal had an uncanny ability to get out of things. But it would hurt like a bitch, and would sure give Hannibal something to think about. Give him a few more scars to focus on.

“I understand that you’re angry with me,” Hannibal said slowly.

Will smiled bitterly.

“That’s what you wanted, too,” he said, “You wanted me to be angry. You wanted me to embrace my rage. You’d even be happy for me to be angry with you, so long as I do it the way you want. This isn’t the way you want.”

Hannibal frowned, tipping his chin up defiantly. The fact he was showing his emotions like this meant Will was really upsetting him. Hannibal didn’t usually show hurt this much. If Will could trust what he was seeing.

“I have never tried to control you, Will,” Hannibal stated, “You have said so yourself.”

Will scoffed.

“That’s because you can’t predict me,” he said, “You’d be a fool to try controlling something you can’t predict, and you know it.”

“Can you even predict yourself in this moment?”

Will frowned.

“Leave. You’re no longer welcome here. I don’t want to hear from you. Leave me alone.”

Hannibal opened his mouth, as if he was going to object, but Will adjusted his aim and Hannibal closed it again. He took a single step backwards before he turned and returned to his car, his feet crunching in the snow. Will kept his shotgun trained on him until the Bentley was out of sight entirely.

Will lowered the shotgun with a heavy sigh. He was suddenly exhausted, and he hardly had the strength to open the barn door again.

The dogs all ran out past his legs, sniffing around where Hannibal and the Bentley had been. They rolled and tussled in the snow, and Will smiled a bit. Max lay down, pressing his belly into the snow and grinned as he joined Will in watching the others play.

He had chased Hannibal off his property with a shotgun.

Will grinned to himself, thinking of how proud Lirette and his daddy would be if they had seen him do it. It had been very country hick of him, and he didn't mind it.

Hannibal had wanted Will to take control, use his anger to get what he wanted. Even though Hannibal clearly wasn't happy with how he was doing it, Will was doing what Hannibal had been encouraging him to do all along.

That had come back and bit him in the ass. Will was glad.

How was Will going to deal with Jack? Jack was expecting Will to feed the Ripper to the FBI on a silver platter any day now. Jack wouldn't wait forever, and Will knew neither could he. Something would have to be done about Hannibal, sooner or later, and Will was the only one who could do it.

Will was slowly coming to the conclusion that he would survive this. He didn't see any path forward that ended with his death. He wasn't about to kill himself, and Hannibal had long since passed the point where he could bear to kill him. So Will would live, even if he never felt worth life again. He would just have to get used to that idea.

Will sighed and pulled out his phone.

Hannibal had been right about one thing. Will shouldn't be alone right now.

"Hey, Will," Beverly greeted, and Will could hear a bit of hesitance, like she wasn't sure what to expect. Will couldn't blame her for that.

"Are you free for dinner tonight?" he asked, "I owe you one."

There was only a beat of silence before Beverly replied, a grin clear in her voice.

"Absolutely. Where do you want to go?"

Will smiled, relieved.

"You pick a place and I'll meet you there," he said, "anywhere you want."

Beverly huffed a laugh.

“That’s a dangerous offer to make someone, Graham,” she said, “you’re lucky I’m not in the mood to take advantage. At least not much.”

Will agreed, and Beverly sent him a text with the place she wanted. It was a bar and grill that reminded Will of his daddy, and he felt comforted by that. He felt like Hannibal had been pulling him gradually farther away from his past, both the good and the bad parts, and now he was free to remember the good parts and let them wash over him. He might even have the strength to fend off the bad parts when they fought to be heard.

Despite how bad he felt, he recognized that a lot of the progress he had made remained. Hannibal had helped him heal, and that hadn’t changed with his betrayal. Even if it felt like it should have.

Will shut the dogs in the barn, making sure it wouldn’t be too cold for them, and left to meet Beverly. It would be good to spend some time with a friend, without feeling obligated to perform any tricks. He didn’t have to impress her, or convince her of anything. She was the only person in the world he had ever met who didn’t make him feel like he had to prove himself. This would be good for him.

—

“No plans with your beau tonight?” Beverly asked, sipping her beer.

Will grimaced.

“No,” he said, “Hannibal and I aren’t talking at the moment.”

Beverly let out a long breath, looking Will over as if she could figure out what was going on just by looking at him. She was the one who was supposedly good at relationships, so maybe she could.

“What did he do? Or do you want to avoid talking about it?” she asked.

Will shrugged. He could talk about it without giving specifics. Maybe she could offer some advice.

“He’s been lying to me since the beginning. And to add insult to injury, we’ve had discussions about lying, and we both promised not to lie to each other. Makes me feel like a whole ass idiot now, and he won’t even apologize. I thought he really cared about me, but now I don’t know.”

Beverly frowned sympathetically.

“Is this the drink to forget kind of breakup?” she asked, “because we can do that if you want to.”

Will was tempted.

The idea of allowing alcohol to soften the hurt and let him float on a cloud of good feeling. It had an undeniable draw. After what he had learned, he didn't think anyone would judge him too harshly for allowing himself to do it. Maybe he would lose all his inhibitions and the drunk version of himself would make a decision by either telling someone what Hannibal had done, or by going to him. Either way, it would end the purgatory he was currently in and didn't see much of a way out of.

Just as Will was about to say as much and order himself something strong, his mind revolted. Memories flashed in his head, vibrant and horrifying.

Monty Graham, passed out drunk, covered in his own vomit. Him shaking and sweating while Will watched helplessly. Monty, still and unbreathing on the couch in his little house. Paramedics swarming in before telling Will he had been dead for hours.

Monty Graham, in his coffin at the funeral, while all those sickly sweet church ladies tried to get Will to confide in them.

No. Will wouldn't kill himself the way his daddy had. He wouldn't let himself self-destruct in that way. Not after everything he had gone through. He had been careful never to let himself follow that path. He wasn't about to start now.

He needed to make Monty and Lirette proud.

"No," Will said, "I don't think drinking is a good idea at the moment. And I have to drive home to the dogs tonight."

Beverly nodded, and didn't press him on the issue. They ordered their food and Beverly started talking. She didn't say anything really important, just anecdotes from her time in college and training for the FBI. She seemed to know that Will just needed company and distraction tonight, so she didn't force him to say anything. Will matched her by telling stories about all the dogs he'd ever had, and how he had enjoyed his time with Caroline and Lirette.

It felt good to talk about them. He had thought it would hurt, especially with Lirette's loss being so fresh, but it didn't. He was happy someone else was going to hear all this, after everything with Hannibal. He didn't have to keep everything inside. By sharing some pieces of his past, Will hoped to make himself another friend, to replace some of what he'd had with Hannibal.

Chapter End Notes

I just couldn't pass up the opportunity to have Will chase Hannibal away with a shotgun. Ah, the nostalgia of it all. I've always thought it would take quite a lot for Hannibal to actually apologize in this kind of situation. Now, you guys just have to wait and see if he ever does.
And, of course, Beverly is there to support Will. Girl's night <3

Up next: Will finds himself facing another demon, of a different kind. One he's all too happy to deal with.

80

Chapter Summary

Will has a rough night :/

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Will, I know you don't generally like people to touch you if they aren't Hannibal Asshole Lecter, but I get the feeling you need a hug."

Will stilled, considering that with a smile. The fact that Beverly had taken his side immediately, without knowing any of the details, despite the fact that she knew both him and Hannibal, made him feel a lot better about talking to her. The fact that she was calling Hannibal names, just to make him laugh or smile, made him feel better.

She really was the best person for him to have gone to when he needed company.

"I think that would be alright," Will said, "at least this once. You're right that I probably need it."

Beverly grinned and wrapped her arms around him, holding him tight for a second. He felt much more awkward trying to return the hug than he ever had with Hannibal, but when she pulled away he felt better.

"You take care, Will," Beverly told him, "keep in touch. I know you're taking a break, and that's good. You pushed yourself too hard with the Ripper case, and you need to look after yourself. If you need anything, call me."

Will smiled and nodded awkwardly. He thought this seemed normal, which was strange to him. He had never had normal.

"I will. Thank you."

"And if you get up the nerve to tell someone, I would love to know what Hannibal did to you so I can slash his tires or something. Only if you want me to, of course."

Will laughed.

"I appreciate it, but I doubt it will come to that. I think I'm going to have to deal with it on my own, and it's just going to be between Hannibal and I."

Beverly nodded with a shrug.

“Just letting you know I have your back. Goodnight, Will.”

Will began walking to his car, waving to Beverly as she did the same.

He had friends. It wasn’t only Hannibal. Will had people he could turn to. He couldn’t tell anyone everything, but he didn’t have to be alone.

Will drove home in the dark, and poured all his whiskey down the drain. He had never kept a lot of it in the house, because he didn’t want to have the temptation to get really drunk, the way his daddy had, but he’d had a few bottles. Now, he was more nervous than ever to have it around, and he wanted to keep from having any of it there to tempt him.

Because the call of oblivion was sweet, and Will didn’t know how strong he was.

Settling into his makeshift bed that night, all the dogs gathered around him in the barn, he thought he could get through this, and come out even better on the other side. He didn’t need Hannibal, no matter how much his chest ached at the thought of him.

—

Will’s phone rang, and he grumbled, pushing Buster and Ellie out of the way so he could get to it. The dogs shifted around on the cold floor of the barn, either settling in their beds that Will had brought out or finding a new place against his body to curl up again. One good thing about this situation was that by laying on the floor, Will had given all the dogs access to him, which in turn gave him more comfort from their contact.

Jack was calling.

Will sighed and answered, laying an arm over his eyes. It had only been about an hour since Will had settled in for the night, and he hadn’t gotten much sleep yet.

“Hello?”

“Will. I’m sorry to bother you, and I know you told me not to, but Abel Gideon escaped.”

Will frowned, his brain immediately firing up and starting to work on this new problem. Maybe he was grasping at anything he could use as a distraction. That was fine.

“He’ll be looking for the Ripper,” he said, “Chilton got him all confused about who he is, and he’ll be looking for someone who can tell him.”

Jack huffed.

“Will he come after you? You told everyone Chilton was right.”

Will shook his head. While that was a valid question, he didn’t think they had anything to worry about. And he didn’t need people coming out to his house to bother him. Not right now. That could only end poorly.

“I doubt he knows all that much about me,” he said, “I would guess he would go after the psychiatrists that saw him. Chilton most of all, if he hasn’t already gotten to him. If it wasn’t for that, I would almost say let him run, because he might lead you to the Ripper.”

Jack was silent for a moment.

“Will, if we make a list of psychiatrists that saw him, Hannibal is going to be on it.”

Will took a slow, deep breath. Jack was right. And Hannibal might be high on that list, because he had been the one to see him just before the press conference.

“Then go protect him,” Will said numbly, “That’s all I can give you right now, Jack. Goodnight.”

Jack sighed.

“Goodnight.”

Will set his phone down again and stared up at the barn roof. His chest ached, but didn’t feel tight. He wanted to be the one to warn Hannibal. He wanted to be there when Abel came after him. He wanted to see Hannibal kill him.

But Hannibal had broken his trust. Will couldn’t let him have what he wanted anymore. For too long, Will had been desperately vying for Hannibal’s attention and approval. It was about time Hannibal learn that not everything went the way he wanted. There were real consequences to his stupid manipulative actions.

Hannibal could fend for himself from now on, just as Will always had done. He didn’t owe Hannibal anything. If Abel managed to kill Hannibal, maybe that would be the best possible option. It would take things out of Will’s hands again, saving him from having to deal with the chaos in his head. He wouldn’t have to deal with the fact that he desperately wanted to see Hannibal again, and feel his solid warmth.

It was selfish of Will to think that. Wanting, even just a bit, for the choice to be taken out of his hands. For some higher power, be it God or the universe, to decide that this would all come to an end so that he would not have to be conflicted over it. It was selfish of him to want it to be that easy, even if he only wanted it with one small, dark corner of his mind. It wasn’t the way a truly good person would feel. Was it?

Will didn’t know the difference any more.

Will knew he wouldn’t be able to get back to sleep, so he sat up and pulled on his boots to take the dogs for a walk.

Max lingered behind the rest of the pack, staying by Will’s side as the others ran towards the tree line. Will smiled and patted him a bit, watching as Winston kept the others together in a group. He had become the leader of the pack in just the short time he had been a part of it, and Will thought the others respected him. It was interesting to Will, and he liked to see how they worked as a unit. As a family.

The cold began to creep into Will's bones, but he felt as if he had already been numb. The temperature didn't bother him, because he had already lost feeling on some deeper level. That was probably something he should be concerned about, because he could get frostbite if he wasn't careful and aware of himself. But it was hard for him to care about something like that right now.

Will remembered eating outside, Hannibal beside him as fireflies lifted off from the tall grass. There were no fireflies tonight. Just the moon and the stars, peeking in and out between clouds that drifted across the sky like they had somewhere to be, but no real motivation to get there. Enough light to see by, and to keep him from feeling the need to use his flashlight. Enough light that he could feel watched, but not see his watcher.

Not enough light to make him feel like he wasn't alone, though. Because he knew better now.

Will took the dogs through the woods, his mind slowly lulling into a more comfortable thought pattern, less frantic and less turbulent. He might be able to sleep now, though he doubted it. But it wasn't a good idea for him to stay out in the cold any longer, so he took the dogs back.

When they came back out of the trees, Will frowned. There was a strange car parked in the drive, and a light was on in the house. It wasn't Hannibal.

There was only one person he could think of it being right now. He guessed he owed Jack an apology, but he wasn't ever going to give him one for this. Because Jack wasn't likely to find out Will had been wrong.

Will ushered the dogs into the barn as quietly as he could and picked up the splitting axe from beside the pile of firewood against the wall. A gun would be too loud and unreliable, and Will didn't have any knives out here. If he could get to the kitchen without running into the intruder, he could get a knife from the block, but the axe would do for now. Might do for everything. Depending on how things went.

Will walked carefully up the steps of his porch, delicately avoiding the places that would make a lot of noise. One good thing about being always nervous about people perceiving you was you understood how to avoid it. Will was very good at sneaking, especially on his own turf.

The light on was in the kitchen, giving Will pause in the living room. If Gideon had been in the kitchen, he might have moved or taken the knives, meaning Will couldn't rely on them being there for what he needed to do next. The fact that he couldn't hear Gideon moving around anywhere either was a worry, and Will had to rethink his approach.

"I've heard a lot about you, Mister Graham," Gideon's voice called from up the stairs somewhere, "Good doctor Chilton had a lot to say about you. You're the one who got away."

Will didn't have the element of surprise anymore, but he did know now that the kitchen was safe to go into for the time being.

What really concerned Will, despite how urgent all other aspects of the situation were, was what exactly Chilton had told Gideon. Will knew Chilton thought he was dangerously crazy, and now he knew that was absolutely true, but he didn't know what kind of things Chilton would expect him to do. What Gideon might be expecting him to do after Chilton had told him everything he believed. If he couldn't subvert Gideon's expectations, he could end up dead here.

Will stepped into the kitchen quietly, glancing around for anything Gideon might have done.

There were a couple knives missing, smaller and sharper ones that he didn't use as often as his larger knives. Will guessed Gideon wanted the closest to a scalpel he could get, being a doctor and knowing how to use them. Small and precise and sharp rather than big and scary.

Will hefted his axe, the long handle making him smile a bit to himself.

He had the advantage of range over Gideon, so long as Gideon didn't have a gun. But if he needed Will's knives, he guessed a gun wasn't in the equation. That was good.

Will took a deep, steadying breath, and returned to the base of the stairs.

Looking up into the second floor, where Will hadn't been in years, he felt like this was a fixed point in his life. Whatever he did here would determine everything going forward. Even in the dark he could see that one of the doors was standing open, and he stared at it for a long moment. It could mean Gideon was in that room, or that he was setting a trap by making Will think he was there. The voice hadn't sounded muffled by a door, so Will guessed he was in that room. He hoped.

Will adjusted his grip on the long handle of his splitting axe and began to ascend into the darkness.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 80 on the anniversary of the show airing. How serendipitous. Happy Hanniversary, everyone.

Anyone up for an axe murder? I think it would be very sexy of Will to kill someone with an axe. (and I did mention he had it a while ago, setting it up for this ;) *pretending I was very good at planning, when in fact everything was incidental*)

Up next: Will takes care of business

81

Chapter Summary

Will takes care of a pest

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Doctor Chilton thinks of you as a monster,” Gideon taunted from the open room, “he thinks you’re only wearing the skin of a man, despite how fragile you show up to others. Did you know he let me watch that press conference? I found your comment fascinating, despite how little you actually committed to with it. I suppose that's to be expected, when it's a blatant lie.”

Well, that explained that. Will hadn’t thought Gideon would come here, because he hadn’t known just how obsessed Chilton was with him and how much he had told Gideon. He had been working without a complete data set. This was a variable he hadn’t had.

“Are you hoping to catch me off guard?” Gideon asked, and Will could hear him moving around in the room, “I get the feeling you don’t spend much time up here, mister Graham. Why is that?”

Will stopped, just a step away from the open doorway, listening. He was trying to place Gideon within the room. The biggest problem with that was that he really wasn’t all that familiar with the layout of this level of the house. He cursed his own inability to use this floor, because now it really was giving him the disadvantage in his own home. If he survived this, things would have to change. At least he knew there wasn't any furniture in there to get in the way or give Gideon a hiding place.

“Does it have anything to do with Steve Walters?”

Will felt icy rage flood his veins, and he entered the room. He caught a flash of movement as Gideon reacted to his presence, and he swung the axe in a wide horizontal arc. As he began the motion, he felt that it was true, his right hand sliding down to join the left near the end of the handle and the action smooth. He just hoped it had the range he needed.

There was a sickening, wet thud as the head of the axe came into contact with something, and there was a heavy whoosh of air.

He’d hit Abel.

Harsh cursing came from the other man in a scream, and the smell of blood hit Will’s nose as he pulled on the axe.

For a moment, it stuck, and he felt that he was pulling Gideon towards himself along with the tool. Then, there was a slight sucking sound and it came free. Will thought he felt the grate of bone against the metal head as well, and he hoped he had hurt the man to the point of crippling.

“I’ll admit I didn’t expect that,” Gideon gasped, his voice intensely pained.

Will felt his body light up with power and control, and he reached over and fumbled for a moment before he managed to switch on the light. He saw Gideon, on his knees and his clothes quickly becoming saturated with his own blood. Will had hit him in the arm, and it looked like it had come near to chopping the whole limb off.

Will wished it *had* come off.

“You don’t know anything about me,” Will said, hefting the axe again and preparing to strike, “Chilton doesn’t know anything about me. Everything he told you is made up by his unimpressive mind. I’m almost sorry for you, for having to listen to him all the time.”

Gideon bared his teeth, and Will watched as a spurt of blood gushed from his nearly severed arm.

“Kill me quickly, mister Graham,” Abel said, “get it over with and become what Doctor Chilton thinks you are.”

Will laughed, feeling as if the world would stop spinning right that moment if he just commanded it to. He took a knee in front of the bleeding man, watching as his pallor began to grey.

“I was a monster before, Abel,” he said, holding the man’s eyes, “I am so much worse than Chilton could ever imagine. I am what the real Chesapeake Ripper is afraid of. I could bring him to ruin with one word.”

Gideon’s eyes flashed.

“You know who he is,” he said.

Will grinned, feeling as if his teeth were growing sharper. As if the monster inside of him was becoming visible through a horrible physical transformation.

“And you will never meet him.”

Gideon lashed out, catching Will by surprise. He had been too confident, and let his guard down.

A hot flash of pain across his bicep, and Will realized Gideon had cut him through his coat.

Will lifted the ax and smashed the blunt edge of the head into Gideon’s face, feeling bone break from the force. Gideon fell back and was still, in a pool of his own blood. Will’s mind flashed back to when he had seen this kind of thing before, when Steve Walters had been

dying in his own basement, his eyes torn from his face. Gideon's nose was broken, at the very least, just as Steve's had been.

Will didn't have any time to waste.

He was injured, too.

Will hefted the axe, standing above the motionless form of his would be attacker, contemplating.

After just a moment, he swung again and sunk the axe into Gideon's skull. Just to be sure. He didn't need any horror movie rebound ending today. Not here, and not now. There was work to do.

When he was sure Gideon couldn't get up and come after him, Will went back down and into the bathroom. He got the first aid kit from the closet and pulled off his coat and his shirt.

The cut wasn't too deep, probably because of how many layers Gideon had needed to go through to get to his flesh, but it definitely needed stitches. It was bleeding sluggishly down Will's arm, and he quickly pressed one of his hand towels over it to staunch the bleeding while he prepared the other materials he would need for taking care of it.

Will smiled bitterly at the memory of stitching Hannibal up after Tobias Budge. He felt foolish for having been so worried about him, now. The Ripper wouldn't be bested by someone like Tobias. The fact that he had managed to land as many blows as he had showed that Hannibal must have been distracted. Probably because he thought Tobias might have killed Will.

Will didn't have anyone to tenderly care for him, here. He had to make do on his own. As he always had. He had learned to do this so he could take care of the dogs and himself, and he had always known he would be alone when he ended up having to use it for himself.

He had never expected being alone now to feel so horrible.

Hannibal could go to hell for this. For making Will feel like being alone was a bad thing, now. If it wasn't for Hannibal, none of this would be happening to him, and he wouldn't feel like being alone was the worst part of it.

Without Hannibal, Will wouldn't have had the courage to enter the house and kill Gideon. He would have cowered in the barn and waited for Jack to come rescue him. The way he had called Lirette and passed out in Steve Walter's kitchen. Without Hannibal, Will wouldn't have had the stability to make a support system with Beverly and Macy for himself. Even as shaky as that was.

Will felt his breath catch on the start of a sob, but he refused to give in. He blinked tears from his eyes as he began the row of stitches. He didn't need Hannibal, and he certainly didn't want him here. Not now. Hannibal had hurt him too much.

Will carefully tied off the end of the stitches, wondering if it would scar. It probably would. He wrapped his arm with a clean bandage and pulled his shirt back on.

He still had a lot of work to do.

Will went out to the barn and got his phone, afraid Jack had tried to call him while this was going on and he had missed it. To his relief, he didn't have any missed calls or messages. He put his phone into his pocket and went back into the house after settling the dogs a bit.

Will was gathering the cleaning supplies he needed when his phone did ring, and he answered it, purposefully making it sound as if he had just been woken up. For the second time that night, from Jack's perspective.

"Jack?" he asked.

"Sorry again, Will," Jack said, sounding frayed and nervous, "but you were right. Chilton's gone. We have people at Lecter's place to make sure Gideon can't get to him, and we're working on the rest of the list, but we don't know where Gideon took Chilton. Do you have any ideas?"

Will glanced out the window, looking at the car Gideon had parked in the drive, and he had a pretty good idea where Chilton was.

"I don't know," Will said, "It really depends on what Chilton was telling Gideon about the Ripper. He would want to bring him somewhere the Ripper might go, or recognize. Maybe you should go to places where the Ripper has left scenes in the past? I can't really say."

Jack sighed.

"Alright. Thank you. You're sure he won't come after you?"

Will almost laughed, but he managed to turn it into a huff, something like a yawn.

"No, I really don't think so, Jack," he said, "I really think he wants the Ripper, and as long as he doesn't know the Ripper is fixated on me he won't want anything to do with me. We kept it out of the papers and away from Lounds, thank god, so I really think I'm fine."

Jack hummed softly, clearly not pleased, but satisfied for the time being.

"Fine. Just keep in touch."

Will frowned, planning out what he needed to do in the next several hours. He wouldn't want to use his phone, and he also wouldn't want to have any calls go suspiciously unanswered during that time.

"Jack, I am exhausted. You realize I've hardly been able to sleep at all tonight because of this? I'm going to have to turn my phone off just to keep you from calling me, or something. I told you I'm not in danger, and you won't leave me alone."

“Will,” Jack said quickly, almost panicked, “I promise I won’t call you unless it’s because I think you’re in danger. I won’t call again for something like this. Just keep your phone on so I can get to you if I find out you’re in danger.”

Will considered that for a moment, smiling to himself at the way he was making Jack squirm. This was way too much fun for being a cover up for a murder. Though, it had been self defense to start with. Will knew he couldn’t make that a convincing argument, especially because he had purposefully gone into the house knowing it was dangerous, when he had a phone in the barn and could easily have avoided putting himself in danger at all.

“When I’ve got some sleep, I’ll send you a text or I’ll call you. Just to let you know I’m safe and alive. Just try not to call me again. I am technically off of work, and I can’t keep doing this for you.”

“Yes. Fine. That’s fine. Thank you.”

The call ended and Will sighed heavily. He calculated he had several hours of work ahead of him, and he had to figure out when was the best time to call Jack to tell him he was alive, or else he might get another call from his nervous boss.

The sun was coming up outside, shining off the frost and snow blanketing the world. It was dazzling, and Will felt better than he would have expected. He wasn’t shaken or nervous about what he had done during the night. He felt fine. Good, even.

Will lugged the supplies up to the second floor and set his hands on his hips as he surveyed the mess.

“I’ve got my work cut out for me,” he sighed, “but even so, I think I should thank you, Doctor Gideon. You’ve brought me quite the present.”

Abel Gideon didn’t respond.

Will got to work.

Chapter End Notes

I think axe murder is very much Will's style. And a two for one! What a treat. I'm sure this whole thing is very cathartic for him.

Up next: Jack is running around like a headless chicken, and we get a glimpse into how Hannibal is dealing with the breakup.

82

Chapter Summary

So, what did Will do with them?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will groaned when his phone rang, and he blinked blearily up at the ceiling. He was completely sore, and he felt as if he hadn't hardly gotten any sleep despite having slept most of the day away.

He answered the phone, feeling like he would never escape these unwanted calls now that people saw him as dependable and stable. He had caused more problems for himself by solving the ones he had always had to deal with.

"Yeah?" he asked.

"Will, I just need to tell you that we found Gideon. And Chilton."

Will sat up in bed and rubbed at his face with a sigh. The dogs stirred from their beds, beginning to gather around curiously.

"That's great. Where were they? Is Chilton griping about wanting to give an interview to the first journalist that he can set his eyes on?"

Jack was silent for a moment, probably dreading telling Will that they had failed to save anyone.

"I think the Ripper got to them first."

Will honestly started at that, surprised that his work could in any way be mistaken for Hannibal's artistry. He hadn't tried to emulate Hannibal's style, too bitter about the betrayal to even consider that. It would have made Hannibal too happy, for Will to try doing what he does. He hadn't been trying, but maybe that hadn't mattered. Will was so wrapped up in Hannibal he didn't really know where one ended and the other began. They were blurring.

But it had been a message, for sure. Might even have been a message for Hannibal, too. He had wanted to express his anger, at the same time as show that he was strong. Show that he didn't actually need Hannibal.

Maybe that would make Hannibal happy anyway.

“They’re dead?” Will asked, “and you think it was the Ripper. Hell, that could be the end of the sounder, if you’re right.”

Jack huffed.

“Exactly. We missed our chance. He was messing with us. He gave us that long of a break between the first one and the second so we wouldn’t know when to expect the last one, and when Gideon escaped he saw his chance. But I think you’re in the clear, now. This doesn’t look to be for you at all. I think this was all for himself.”

Will had to pull the phone away from his face, afraid of laughing right in Jack’s ear. He was mixed up, confusing the observations he was making with the assumptions he had already drawn. He understood bits and parts, but they didn’t make sense when combined with the things he thought he understood but was wrong about.

“Do you want me to take a look?” Will asked when he felt he could speak without laughing like a loon.

Jack considered it with a hum, and Will honestly didn’t know what he would choose.

“Yes. I’ve already called Lecter in for his opinion, but if you’re feeling up to it right now, I want your eyes here as well.”

Will nodded to himself, mentally preparing for this.

He would have to see Hannibal again, and he would see if Hannibal could understand what this meant, the way Will had understood what he meant with the Ripper scenes. He would have to decide if he wanted to tell Jack the truth about it not being a Ripper scene, or if he would let his first real design be added to the gallery of Hannibal’s art.

“Send me the location, and I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

—

Hannibal was dressed as impeccably as ever, his suit all crisp lines without a stray crease anywhere. He surveyed the scene with an air of superiority, ostentatious and intimidating.

He was *too* put together, actually. His hair was combed harshly back with gel, making him look dangerous and proud. It had been a long time since Will had seen him intentionally stand out in this way, as if he wanted to make everyone around him nervous. He was wearing armor, rather than a mask.

When Hannibal turned to see Will, his eyes flashed, and Will could see he wasn’t entirely sure what to expect from him. There was a dark hunger in that look, but also a hesitance and hurt. Hannibal wasn’t taking their situation all that much better than Will was. That gave Will a small sense of vindication, because he refused to be hurt by Hannibal without knowing Hannibal was aware of the harm he had done.

“Will, I need you to tell me for absolute sure whether or not this is the Ripper,” Jack said, ushering Will forward impatiently, “I need to know if we’re expecting more.”

Will nodded, looking over the scene with mild interest.

It was different, seeing it in the dwindling light of evening after he had slept a few hours. His mind was more clear, and he could see, now, why Jack thought it was another Ripper scene.

Abel Gideon was in pieces, by necessity. The axe had felt right for him, someone who Will didn't really care all that much about. He had only been a vessel for Will's pent up frustration and rage. A catharsis of blood. The way Will had cut him up was meant to hide the way that he had been killed, not wanting to draw attention to there having been an actual altercation. Hannibal never fought his victims. Other than Tobias Budge, Hannibal avoided fighting whenever possible. In that way, Will could see why Jack wanted to say this was the work of the Ripper. The way Will had worked with it had been learned from all his time obsessing over the case. He had fallen back onto what he had learned from Hannibal, even when he had been angry with the man and refused to see him.

Abel was strewn around the real star of the show, though. Chilton was the one Will had cared about, and therefore the centerpiece of Will's first real scene. His debut appearance. Hannibal should be pleased.

Chilton had come to embody how Will had felt for nearly all his life, through the eyes of a killer Will had come to a grudging understanding of in his mind during the case. A killer who Will had not been able to see to his end, and who had forced Will to examine his own relationship with God and the people around him.

Chilton was on his knees, his hands spread out before him and his face tilted up to the sky. His eyelids were closed, hiding the fact that what his eyes had been replaced with was scraps of newspaper, all talking about the press conference he had caused. The skin of his back had been flayed to either side to give him a set of wings.

Unlike the way Elliot Buddish had done his wings, Will had taken his time with it and made them slightly bigger, even taking some skin from around his ribs on the sides towards the front, and the wings had defined feathers, making them much more detailed and birdlike. Will had also removed his tongue, but he doubted anyone knew that yet, as he had cleaned all the blood and fastened the mouth shut.

Chilton's chest had been pierced with a scalpel, right into the heart. Will had found the scalpel in the car Gideon had left in front of the house, and he had wondered why Gideon hadn't brought it into the house in order to attack him with it. He figured maybe he had been saving it for more delicate work, or for when he met the Ripper.

Will had been only too glad to take that from him as well.

Will had been pleased to see that Chilton had been left undamaged, only flinching a bit when he had smelled the rotten fruit scent of chloroform. He had been pleased to realize exactly how much of his past he had gotten over. He wondered if Hannibal's betrayal had forced him to stop lingering on the past and face the present, causing a sudden burst of overcoming.

Will wasn't in the mood to thank him for it, though. Not today.

Will looked at Hannibal, parsing out his reaction to the scene. He wasn't all that surprised to see that Hannibal was looking at the tableau with clear appreciation and admiration. He could have guessed that Hannibal would like to see him do something like this. So long as Hannibal understood it was him who had done it.

When Hannibal met Will's eyes, he saw that Hannibal did. He knew it was Will, and he was pleased with him.

And Will knew what he had to say.

"It's the Ripper, Jack," he said, turning to his boss with the shake of his head, "But I can't say for sure this will be the last one of the sounder. I told you before that something is changing with him, and I don't think I can predict him. Not anymore. It's like he's taken a step back, away from me. He doesn't want me to see everything anymore. He wants to have some secrets, without me finding them out."

Jack covered his face with his hands, groaning and making it more than clear that he was unhappy with that. Will had expected as much, and Jack wasn't the one he was overly concerned with at the moment. Despite himself, he needed to know what Hannibal thought about what had been said.

Hannibal had tipped his head, the way he did when he was feeling particularly fond, or when he wasn't sure what Will was up to.

If he couldn't figure out what Will was going for, that was it. Will had never been the kind of person to put an ultimatum to the people in his life, but this situation had forced his hand. Hannibal had put them here, and he would have to figure out how to fix things, or else Will would have to figure out a way for everything to come to an end for both of them.

"I agree with Will," Hannibal said, as if nothing had changed at all, "on all counts but one. I believe our Ripper would still like Will to learn his secrets, but he is afraid of what Will might think of him when he uncovers certain truths. I believe that is why he has taken a step back, because he fears being burned."

Will huffed and folded his arms, but didn't say anything. Jack didn't seem at all comforted by the thought that the Ripper still wanted Will to understand him. If anything, he was more unhappy, because it meant the Ripper was likely to kill more people with the hopes of showing Will the secrets he hadn't yet figured out.

"If the Ripper is going to keep up with this, we have a larger window to catch him," Jack said, grasping at the only silver lining he could possibly think of, "and if you really do get to understand him, you'll definitely catch him."

Will managed not to roll his eyes. If Hannibal was going to play it that way, Will could give as well as he got. Jack being confused and unaware meant he only had to be a bit careful about how he said things.

"Maybe that's what he's afraid of. Maybe he's afraid of being caught when I figure him out. That would make sense. He's a coward, and he doesn't think he'll be able to get away once

I’ve pinned him down. He’s trying to run away by not letting me get any closer, instead of running away once I know who he is. He doesn’t trust me, even though he wants me to like and trust him. He’s a hypocrite.”

Will saw the slight twitch of Hannibal’s lips, betraying his displeasure. He managed not to smile at that, but he did raise an eyebrow in challenge.

Jack was just confused and floundering.

“What should we do?” he asked, “We’ve tried everything you’ve suggested up to this point, and I don’t know if I feel any closer to actually catching him. Tell me you have a new idea how to get him to trip up.”

Will shook his head.

“I might understand him, uncomfortably well, but I think maybe I’m too close to it. You should have Hannibal come up with ways to catch him from now on.”

Jack eagerly turned to Hannibal, likely more than happy to get ideas out of him. He had already been thinking he had wrung Will dry on this count, clearly, and had wanted permission to turn his attention on someone else for results.

Annoyance flickered across Hannibal’s face, but he quickly smoothed it over to answer Jack’s questions.

Chapter End Notes

I updated about twelve hours later than usual, sorry. I almost forgot entirely, so late is better than never. I haven't missed one yet, and I don't intend to start now. The panic I felt when I realized I hadn't updated when I usually do. You would not believe.

Up next: Will copes through work, and Hannibal doesn't cope well at all.

83

Chapter Summary

Will refuses to back down.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will armed some sweat from his forehead and huffed. It was snowing hard outside, so all the dogs were down in the living room, sitting around the fire. All but Winston, who was following Will around as he worked.

“I guess I should be grateful to Abel Gideon,” Will told the dog as he surveyed his work, “If not for him, I probably wouldn’t have got over my avoidance of the second floor. Funny, that being attacked can have that effect.”

Will figured he was one of very few people in the world who could come out of that kind of situation not only alive, but mentally stronger. He was one of very few people who would ever find themself in a situation like that, so he supposed he would never have confirmation for that.

Will wondered where he would be now, if it wasn’t for Hannibal. If they had never met. He was sure he would have improved a bit, at least, from where he had been before. He would have ended up going to therapy with someone, and maybe they would have helped. If nothing else, he would have found his coping mechanisms through the cases, like Cassie Boyle. That was just evidence of how messed up he really was. Even in this imagined world, he still found comfort in death and violence.

Will had to accept that Steve Walters hadn’t made him that way. Steve had given him plenty of trauma and problems, but the attraction to violence wasn’t one of them, and his ability to identify with killers had come before him. There was something fundamentally wrong with his brain.

And Hannibal had seen it from the start. Hannibal had nurtured and fed that part of Will, and now it was stronger than the part that told him to stop.

Will had become a monster. After all his work to keep himself from killing again, all it had taken was a push from Hannibal, and they had ended up here.

There was a polite knock at the front door, and the dogs began to bark excitedly. Winston just tipped his head, and Will sighed.

“Yeah, you know who it is too, don’t you?” he asked.

It had to be Hannibal. What he might do, or want to accomplish by being here, Will wasn't entirely sure. But it really couldn't be anyone else. And he doubted Hannibal would leave if he was ignored. If nothing else, Hannibal was patient.

Will headed down, unconcerned that he was wearing faded jeans and an old T-shirt. Hannibal would have to deal with it.

Will opened the door and met Hannibal's eyes defiantly.

The man looked almost surprised Will had answered, freezing for a moment before his eyes quickly flicked over Will's form and stuck when he saw the bandage on Will's bicep.

"Gideon was harder to kill than I'd expected," Will said, pressing his fingers into the bandage so it hurt, reminding himself it was Hannibal's fault, and that he had been left all alone to deal with it, "Why are you here? I told you you're not welcome."

Hannibal's frown deepened, and he wet his lips.

"You must be aware that we will have to find some agreement or compromise," Hannibal said, "we cannot continue acting as we did in front of Jack at your scene."

Will huffed.

"Funny, coming from you," he spat, "you loved hearing me talk about the Ripper before. You let me go on for hours about how powerful the scenes made me feel, and how beautiful I found them. You're just a narcissist, and you were basking in my praise. Now that I can see how pathetic you are, you don't like hearing what I have to say."

Hannibal sighed.

"I adore every part of you, Will," he said, "not only the part that is in love with me. Not only the part that had thrived on my work. I adore the part of you that feels grief more deeply than anyone else, that can-"

"Stop," Will said, "I don't want to hear it. You've been lying to me, Doctor Lecter, and you know how I feel about lies. Do you really expect to fix all that broken trust by telling me how much you love all the shattered pieces? I don't care how you feel, anymore. You haven't even apologized, which shows you don't think you've done anything wrong."

Hannibal considered that, clearly unhappy. Good. Will wasn't trying to make him feel better.

"I'm sorry, Will," he said, the words pained, "I am sorry I lied. I am sorry I hurt you. I-"

"Kneel."

Hannibal stopped, searching Will's face as if he wasn't sure Will was serious.

"Pardon?"

“You heard me just fine,” Will said, “You’re trying to beg for my forgiveness. Do it properly. Get on your knees and beg.”

Hannibal hesitated only a moment before he slowly lowered himself onto his knees, the fabric of his expensive suit no doubt getting wet through with melted snow and rock salt. He kept his gaze locked with Will’s, and began again.

“I am sorry for deceiving you, and for taking advantage of your nature. I am sorry for promising not to lie to you when the promise itself was a lie. Please, Will. What must I do to be forgiven?”

Will stared back at Hannibal, wishing he could feel numb. He wanted to take hold of Hannibal’s hair and throw him around like a ragdoll. He wanted to beat Hannibal bloody and then lick the blood from his fingers. He wanted to invite Hannibal in and kiss him breathless. He wanted to wake up beside him tomorrow.

“I guess you’ll have to figure that out,” Will said coolly, “But this was a good start.”

Will shut the door and locked it, grabbing another box of books and heading upstairs to put them on the shelves he had just moved.

This room was going to be a kind of library, now. The place where Abel had died and bled out on the floor was now covered with a green rug, hiding the new floorboards Will had put in to replace the stained ones. Will had cleaned it well enough no forensic team would be able to find a trace of blood, and he had done the entire room so there were no suspiciously clean areas, as well as making sure he didn’t miss anything.

He’d told Beverly before that what he did was just a different kind of forensics. He was lucky that had been true, because he knew how to hide what he had done. Hannibal had years of practice, but Will had gone to college for this exact thing.

Will watched out the window as Hannibal drove away, and he wondered if there was a limit to how far he could push Hannibal. If he kept pushing, would he eventually become enough trouble that Hannibal would just kill him anyway?

Will didn’t know, and he couldn’t predict whether he would find out, either. For all he knew, Hannibal would figure out something before they went too far.

Will turned, seeing Winston watching him from the doorway.

“I guess things are going to be touch and go for a while here,” he told the dog, “at least I can be pretty sure Alana will take y’all in if I end up dead. She’ll feel too bad to keep being angry at me.”

Winston grinned and settled down to lay on the rug. Will smiled at the sight, and began shelving the books.

—

Will unwrapped his arm and hissed when he touched the red skin around the wound. It felt hot, and he knew it had gotten infected despite the care he had taken to clean and care for it. He pulled out the first aid kit again and smeared some antibiotic ointment over the stitches. The cool gel soothed the wound, and Will sighed. If he had wondered about whether it would scar or not before, he could stop wondering. Even if his stitches were perfect, the infection would hinder the healing process enough it most likely would.

Hannibal would be livid.

Will knew that Hannibal would be jealous that he hadn't been the one to give Will the scar. He was already jealous that he had not been there to stitch it up and care for Will.

If nothing else, it could serve to remind Will of what Hannibal had done. What had been lost.

Will swallowed some aspirin and wrapped his arm again.

What would Lirette think if he could see Will now? Would he be pleased that Will was finally able to stand up for himself and function just about like a normal person? Or would he be horrified by Will's darkness, and ashamed that Will had given in? Would he come to regret saving Will from Steve Walters? Would he wish he could go back and let Will be killed by the man?

And what about Monty? How would Will's daddy feel if he knew Will had become a killer, and refused to turn in a man who had killed so many people? Would Monty Graham be ashamed of what his son had become?

Will pushed those thoughts away and got ready for work. He was teaching, but he wasn't consulting on cases. He had put his foot down on that, and as of yet Jack hadn't come to him with anything. He had decided he would go along if Jack brought him something new, but he wouldn't work the Ripper case anymore.

Will had saved himself from Steve Walters, he could save himself from Hannibal Lecter. He didn't need someone to come in and save him. He never had. He had all the tools to take care of himself, and he had learned that for himself.

It had been interesting to go back to the routine he had known before meeting Hannibal. Teaching and caring for the dogs, having the rest of his time to himself. Now that he had stopped being terrified all the time, he enjoyed it a lot more. He talked to Beverly or the guys from the lab whenever they stopped by, and he didn't mind as much if his students stayed after class to ask questions. He spent more time doing the things he had liked before, making fishing lures and fixing engines. If it wasn't cold and frozen outside, he would spend a lot more time fishing.

Maybe when spring came around, he would.

Despite how peaceful things had been, it was all run through with an ache of loneliness. He wished he was sharing it all with Hannibal.

Chapter End Notes

Who would have thought that Will would be dealing with this so well, when Hannibal "perfect in every way" Lecter is having a mental breakdown? (me. I thought so. It was me.)
Also, Will being a little bit of a dom here was just too good a chance to pass up. And it will be relevant again. Later.

Up next: Things become a little more heated. Beverly is still the best.

84

Chapter Summary

BeverlyBeverlyBeverly <3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will knew he was there before he saw him. He could feel Hannibal's eyes on him from the door of the classroom as he finished the lecture. Will didn't know what he was here about, but he could wait until the end of class.

Hannibal lurked like a phantom until the students began filing out, and then walked up as Will leaned against his desk to wait for him.

"It's usually Jack who likes to show up here before giving me bad news," Will said, "if you're here to tell me someone's died, I'll have to tell him you're stealing his schtick."

Despite the way Will had said it, Hannibal didn't smile. He stopped just in front of Will, and his expression was dour.

"What is it you want from me?" Hannibal asked, "You have left me in purgatory, and I would like out."

Will snorted.

"Yeah, well join the club."

Hannibal stared at him in silence.

"You want to know what I want from you. Well, I refuse to tell you. You've been making me jump through hoops all this time, figuring out who you are and what you want. It's your turn. You figure out what it is I want from you, without my help."

Hannibal's hand darted out and seized Will's arm, making him hiss in pain as Hannibal's thumb pressed into the bandaged row of stitches holding the infected flesh together. Hannibal pulled him forward a bit, and Will felt his heart skip in fear. The Chesapeake Ripper was angry with him. And he didn't seem to be thinking entirely clearly. Will could die right here.

"I gave you help, all along the way," Hannibal growled, "I was giving you everything you needed to uncover the truth. I was all but leading you by the hand, and begging you to understand. You are giving me nothing."

Will set his jaw and shoved Hannibal away with a hand on his chest. It made him grimace at the pain as Hannibal pulled at his arm.

“You *deserve* nothing,” Will hissed, “After what you did, you’re lucky I’ll even talk to you when you show up unannounced. I should chase you off with my shotgun every time. But I don’t. Because some part of me wants you to win. Some part of me wants you to figure it out. Some part of me wants you to fix it. I may try to cut that part out, but for now that’s the advantage that you have. If you don’t want me to shut you out completely, you’ll be grateful for the chance I’m giving you.”

Hannibal released Will’s arm, and Will thought he looked a bit chastised. He realized just how angry Will was about the betrayal. Will wasn’t just hurt and sad. He was furious. He could kill someone, he was so angry.

If Hannibal realized that, he didn’t allow his satisfaction to show. Just his displeasure and humility at being called out.

“Will,” he said, nearly begging just in that one word, “you don’t have to be alone.”

Will laughed bitterly. He should have expected Hannibal to try that. Even though it was so far beneath him.

“I’m probably less alone than you are. I have some friends. You don’t have *anyone* , though. You surround yourself with people, like at your dinner, but none of them know anything about you. I have actual friends other than you, and I’m not alone. You, though. You *are* entirely alone without me. So you had better figure things out, or you’re going to be alone forever. And now you know how it feels to be seen and understood. Like I do.”

Hannibal’s eyes flashed with a deep hurt, and he opened his mouth to speak, but he didn’t have the chance.

“Hey, Will,” Beverly called, walking in and eyeing Hannibal suspiciously, “how’re you doing?”

Will smiled and stepped away from Hannibal.

“I’m alright. What’s up? You have a new case you want my help on, or did you just stop by to chat?”

Beverly kept glancing at Hannibal, as if he was here to hurt Will and she was just waiting for him to try so she could strike. Will appreciated her for the protectiveness, even though he knew she didn’t stand a chance against Hannibal.

“Does the answer to that change how you feel about seeing me?” she asked.

Will shook his head.

“If you’re here about a case, we can talk while we walk to the labs,” he said, “If not, we could sit down, or go get a coffee.”

Beverly huffed, smiling.

“Let’s go get coffee. I’ll buy this time, since you paid for dinner. You pick the place.”

Will nodded, turning back to Hannibal and leveling him with a stare.

“You didn’t need me for anything else, did you?” he asked.

Hannibal frowned, but shook his head.

“No. I hope you enjoy yourself, Will.”

Will smiled and turned back to Beverly.

“Let’s go.”

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“Why was he there?” Beverly asked, shaking her head in wonder, “he wasn’t trying to intimidate you, was he?”

Will rolled his eyes.

“Not in the way most guys would,” he said, which was certainly true, “he’s not abusive, Bev. I think he’s honestly sorry. He was asking me what he can do to fix it between us.”

Beverly huffed, taking a sip of her coffee.

“Don’t make it easy on him,” she said, “Usually, if they do something like this once, they’ll do it again. You have to teach him a lesson, if you ever let him get back with you. I don’t want to tell you what to do, but I don’t want another friend who keeps getting back into the same toxic relationship because they can’t let go.”

Will nodded, genuinely considering it.

There wasn’t really any way for Hannibal to do the same thing again. No secret he could ever keep would be this devastating, and nothing he did was likely to be this damaging. If he could show he had learned his lesson, it would be relatively safe for Will to let him back into his life.

That didn’t mean it would work. God knew Will would never see Hannibal exactly the same way he had before. There would never be that easy lightness to what they had again.

But would that be so bad? Will had easy and light relationships now, with Macy and Beverly. He had been craving that darker kind of connection with the Ripper, before learning who it was. If it had turned out to be someone else, he wouldn’t feel so conflicted about it. Because it hadn’t been a lie.

“He already knows never to try this with me again,” Will said thoughtfully, “but I haven’t given in yet, despite all his literal begging. I’m not making it easy on him, for sure. He’s not

taking it easy on me, either, though. He keeps asking me what I want him to do."

Beverly raised her eyebrows, apparently impressed.

"Good for you. Stand up for yourself and don't back down. Don't forget that I've got your back if you ever need me. I can even kick him out of the labs if you get tired of him while you're working."

Will grinned.

"That probably won't be necessary. At least, not yet. If he doesn't figure it out pretty quick, he might just become insufferable. I'll let you know if I ever need you to come to my rescue."

Beverly nodded seriously, though she was smiling.

"You're really looking great, Will," she said, "when I first met you, you reminded me of a squirrel. You looked like you were on the verge of either running away or dying of fright. Or maybe more like a chihuahua. Shaking and afraid."

Will couldn't help but laugh at that. He imagined she was right, and he had gone through a lot of his life looking like a nervous small animal. He must have made a lot of people nervous, like they had to be careful not to spook him lest they be responsible for his flight.

Not Hannibal, though. When they'd had breakfast in Minnesota, Hannibal said he thought of Will like a wolf. An unhappy and caged one, but a wolf all the same. A creature of power and teeth. Hannibal had looked at Will and realized that he had been taught to be nervous, rather than being that way inherently. Hannibal had seen his potential.

"I'm feeling a lot better, even despite the whole situation with Hannibal right now. I'm not too worried about taking up space in the world so much as I was before. I'm glad it's showing. At least it didn't make you too nervous to talk to me, else I would probably be doing a mite worse at the moment."

Beverly preened theatrically.

"Well, never let it be said that appearances get in the way of discovery. I knew you were a big name in forensic circles, and I wanted to talk to you. I know some people who would drool if they knew I could get coffee with you whenever I want," she said, "everyone loves you for the monograph. You probably wouldn't like half of them nearly as much as they would want."

Will huffed a laugh and looked out the window at the slowly thawing world. The snow was melting, and things were starting to warm up.

"Yeah, that's the general trend. People love the idea of me, but the reality leaves something to be desired."

Beverly hummed, taking another drink from her coffee. She looked completely at ease in his presence, clearly not having any idea that he had such a darkness within him. That she was

currently investigating a murder that Will had committed.

Will wondered how Hannibal could go through all his life like this, with a secret he wanted people to see but could never show. He understood why Hannibal was so desperate for Will to understand him, and then stay in his life. It would be earth shattering to have such a connection dangled in front of him only to be taken away just as it was coming to completion.

Will hoped he would figure out how to put things back together. If not for Hannibal himself, for Will. Will needed that connection as well.

“If you need a rebound, I could set you up with someone, I bet. Maybe not someone much like Lecter, but maybe that’s a good thing. Because you are absolutely a catch, Will Graham, and you should get comfortable with that idea. Do a little something with your hair, and you’re a babe.”

Will flushed, laughing softly. The ghost of Hannibal’s fingers massaging a gel into his hair made him all the more flustered, and he couldn’t even argue with her. He had seen himself that night, and he knew he had looked good.

It was strange, though, to accept that as a fact rather than a phenomenon that had occurred once.

“If I need a rebound, I’ll let you know. Right now, I’m good.”

Beverly nodded.

“Cheers to that.”

Chapter End Notes

If you think Hannibal's acting out of character in this chapter at all, that's entirely intentional. Because people don't act like themselves when they're feeling the way he feels. They do things they wouldn't normally do. (can you tell I'm nervous people are going to get mad at me for it?) And don't worry! Eventually, things will improve!

Up next: Will has a few revelations that put things into perspective

85

Chapter Summary

Will realizes a sequence of events he had only been given pieces of before.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will froze, thread and tools suspended in midair over the fly he had been tying as he closed his eyes and cursed himself.

He hadn't even realized.

The Hungry Men.

That was how Hannibal had described what had been his sister's demise. Mischa had been ill, and they had all been starving.

They had killed Mischa to *eat* her.

Had they eaten her in the end? Had they fed her to Hannibal? Had he killed them? Had he eaten them?

Will tried to picture it, an eight year old Hannibal, huddled close with his doe-eyed sister. The Hungry Men gathering around and pinching them to test the meat. The men were only shadows to Will, with bright eyes like arctic wolves. They chattered and laughed like hyenas, tearing Mischa from Hannibal's arms and striking him on the back of the head when he fought them.

A metal bathtub, bubbling on the stove. Blood on the snow. Small bones in a broth.

Hannibal, staggering into the snow, falling to his knees. Weak from hunger, fear, and neglect. A ghost of the image he would create all these years later, kneeling in the snow on Will's porch. At Will's behest.

Would Hannibal ever forgive Will for what he had done?

Will sighed and put down his fly tying gear to grab his phone. He hesitated, not sure he wanted to call Hannibal, but needing to ask him a question or two about what he had just put together. It was probably a bad idea to reach out now, while he was trying to make Hannibal work for it. He might show too much of his hand too early, and that could lead to an end he didn't want.

Because, despite everything, Will still wanted Hannibal. He was angry about being lied to, and for Hannibal letting him make a fool of himself. He was angry Hannibal had let him get so far and deep into their relationship without knowing the truth. But he didn't want anything other than what Hannibal could give him.

Before Will made up his mind, the phone rang in his hand.

It was Hannibal.

That took care of that, at least.

"Hello," Will said calmly, "what can I do for you?"

Hannibal sighed in relief, as if he hadn't known if Will would answer. He had been afraid he would be ignored.

"Do you want me to stop?" Hannibal asked, and he sounded honestly defeated, as if this was his last card to play.

Will was surprised. He had never expressed a desire for the Ripper to stop killing when he was talking to Hannibal. Aside from the one time he had lied, and Hannibal had known it wasn't true. Hannibal thought the fact that it was *him* had changed things on such a fundamental level that Will would be disgusted by it now. He hadn't expected that.

"No," he sighed, "you know I wouldn't ask that of you. I may be cruel, but I don't want you to stop being who you are."

Another soft, relieved sound from Hannibal, and he sounded tired. Will wondered if he had been having nightmares. It was the tail end of winter, and he couldn't protect Will. He must be feeling more alone than he had in a long time, and he didn't have a way to remedy that. Will wondered how he was coping.

"You are a cruel and jealous God, Will," Hannibal agreed, "and as much as I would claim that I know you, I still cannot predict you."

Will knew what he was asking for. Hannibal wanted him to give some clue as to how he could fix things. If he didn't give Hannibal a direction to go, he thought it likely Hannibal would lash out in anger, like a child. He would hurt people. Will had to give him something.

"What were their names?" he asked.

Hannibal was silent, so Will elaborated.

"The Hungry Men."

Hannibal took a sharp breath in and muttered something in Lithuanian. Will thought it sounded like a prayer. Then, he began talking.

Hannibal told Will the entire story, naming each of the men and describing them with verbage a younger version of himself would have used. He explained his journey to Paris, and how he

had tracked them each down.

It had been the last of these men who had brought him to North America, as it so happened. When his work was done, Hannibal had just stayed. He had finished medical school and made a life for himself here. He surrounded himself with beautiful things and beautiful people, killing those who marred the world and turning them into works of art.

Hannibal talked until it grew late, the sky dark outside Will's little house, and Will just listened. He had wanted honesty from Hannibal, and now he was getting it. He was learning the whole truth that sat right at the center of Hannibal's mind. He had stumbled down the halls of his vast memory, and rather than fumble at the latch to this part, he had just broken down the door.

Hannibal was in for a rough night. If he got any sleep at all.

When Hannibal had told everything he could bear to, a delicate silence spun out between them. Will could sense Hannibal's exhaustion through the phone, and knew he was at his most vulnerable right now. What happened next could break him, and Will didn't want that.

"Alright," Will said softly, realizing he had dried tears on his face. He had cried at some point while Hannibal was telling his story. "Thank you. All I want from you is the truth. We've both been hiding things from each other, and I want that to stop. Get some sleep, and figure out how to be honest with me in the morning. When you have a plan, we can talk again."

Hannibal sighed, and he sounded exhausted.

"Thank you, Will," he said.

Will shook his head. He doubted he deserved to be thanked. Not by anyone.

"Goodnight, Hannibal."

Will lay in the dark that night, staring up at the ceiling for hours. Winston was on the bed, having easily noticed Will was upset by something, and Will carded his fingers through the dog's thick fur.

He hadn't been kind to Hannibal in the aftermath of learning the truth. Hannibal hadn't deserved his kindness after everything he had done. But now, knowing what he did, and understanding why Hannibal did all the things he had, Will wished he had been kind. He would like to have the chance to comfort that younger version of Hannibal, the one who had loved his sister and become mute upon her loss. The boy who had stumbled out into the snow and never been the same. The boy who had been so alone, and only seen as a monster when he showed his true face to anyone.

While Will had been hiding his darkness behind the trauma and vulnerability, Hannibal had been hiding the soft flesh of his hurt behind the mask of his darkness. After Hannibal had built Will up to help him not feel hurt anymore, Will had torn down all Hannibal's defenses and exposed all his pain. Will felt like it had been necessary, to remind Hannibal he wasn't a

god, and show him that he was still prone to human failures. Hannibal had needed the reality check, just as Will had needed someone to show him how strong he could be.

Will wasn't sure if that put them on even ground just yet, but he guessed that's what he had been after. He had always felt less than Hannibal, even on his best days. He had wanted to feel like they were equals. To do that, he couldn't just build himself up to the same height as Hannibal. He had to break Hannibal a bit as well.

Now, they would either grow together, or not. Like a haphazard tree graft, they might become something more, or infection might come and destroy them both. What they grew into might be twisted and ugly, but that would be better than being separate. Even dying together would be better than being separate.

That was what Will had wanted for a while. He had wanted for them to become one, so deeply connected they wouldn't survive separation. For their skin and sinews to knit together until they couldn't be pulled apart. Now, he believed Hannibal wanted that as well, possibly just as desperately.

Only time would tell if they would get that.

Will eventually managed to fall asleep. It wasn't an easy night for either of them, he knew.

Chapter End Notes

So, there it is. Will knows everything.

...almost everything.

Up next: One last secret.

86

Chapter Summary

I bet most of us forgot about something, but Hannibal didn't. Here it is.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will's phone rang, and he once more reflected that this was an unfortunate side effect of being more social. People felt comfortable calling him. And he had to talk to them.

He was surprised and pleased to see that it was Beverly, so he smiled as he sat up and answered it, swinging his legs over the side of the bed and shoving his feet into a pair of boots so he could let the dogs out.

"Hey Bev, what's up?" he asked, pulling on a robe over his pajamas and opening the front door.

"Jack wanted to call you, but I told him you wouldn't want to hear from him," she said, "I'm telling you now that you don't have to come in, but we just thought you should know."

Will frowned, suddenly very concerned about Hannibal despite being fairly sure Hannibal wouldn't have been hurt or caught. The call would sound very different if either of those things had happened. Especially coming from Beverly.

"What happened?" he asked, pulling the robe closer around himself as Max walked back up the porch steps and lay by Will's feet.

"Miriam Lass showed up this morning," Beverly said, freezing Will in his tracks, "She's alive. She doesn't remember anything, she doesn't even know how long she's been gone. But she's fine."

Hannibal, that *bastard* .

"The Ripper just… kept her around?" he asked, closing his eyes and pinching the bridge of his nose, "that doesn't seem like him."

Beverly gave the verbal equivalent of a shrug, and Will could hear activity in the background. He figured she was probably busy, but had wanted to be the one to call so he wasn't put in a bad mood first thing in the morning.

"Who knows anymore?" Beverly asked, "I mean, if anyone could guess, I would say you could, but it really doesn't make sense, does it?"

Will sighed, thinking back to the night before.

“He probably wanted to use her to taunt Jack. Wait until after Jack gave up, wait until Jack got annoying, then send him pieces of her that were too fresh to have been cut off two years ago. He changed his mind.”

Beverly clicked her tongue thoughtfully.

“Do you think he changed his mind because of you?” she asked, “I mean, you said he’s obsessed with you right now, right? Did you do something to make him change his mind?”

Will thought he had, actually. He hadn’t even realized it in the moment, hadn’t considered Miriam in a while, but he thought he knew exactly why she had been let go now. He thought he understood why the Ripper hadn’t carried out his plan with her.

“I’ll have to think about that some more,” Will said, “sounds like you have work to do, though. I’ll talk to you later. If Jack thinks you need my help with anything, I’m alright with that. But don’t necessarily encourage him to call me. Right?”

Beverly laughed.

“Right. Talk later. Bye.”

Will sighed and whistled for the dogs, holding the door open as they all rushed in. Max struggled to get up from his lying position, and walked slowly inside. Will reminded himself to give Max some of the medication he’d gotten from the vet. Apparently it was just regular arthritis, which Will could deal with. It was probably worse right now because of the cold, but it wasn’t a sign that anything serious was wrong with Max, which was a relief. He was old, but not dying just yet.

Will started getting dressed and ready for the day while some bacon cooked on the stove, thinking it all over.

Hannibal had been holding onto Miriam Lass all this time, no doubt planning to taunt Jack with her, but he had changed his mind.

Because she was something he had been hiding from Will. She was a secret. Something he would have to tell Will about eventually. He had anticipated that Will wouldn’t want him to keep her anymore, and wouldn’t want to kill her either. He had let her go rather than have it be another argument between them.

Will was sure Hannibal had been careful to not let her be able to identify him as her captor. She didn’t remember anything, at least not yet, and Will knew she wouldn’t ever remember enough to point the finger his way. This was not Hannibal giving up and turning himself in. This was Hannibal clearing the way for the future.

Hannibal was planning the future, and it looked like he planned for Will to be a part of it.

Will ate his breakfast slowly, thinking about everything that meant.

A gentle warmth built in his chest as he left for work, and he couldn't help but smile to himself on the drive.

He still didn't know if everything would work out. He and Hannibal had a few things to smooth over before he could be sure of that. But Hannibal was making a clear, concerted effort, and that inspired some level of confidence. If they both tried, he had an idea they could make it work between them. And neither of them would have to be alone again.

That was a big thing for both of them, and Will knew it. Being alone. They had both been alone all their lives, and finding each other had put a stop to that, for a time. Now that they really, truly understood each other, it would be even more than just no longer being alone. They could accept each other.

Will knew he would kill again. He had opened the floodgates with Gideon and Chilton. They had been the real deal, no gun as a barrier between Will and the violence. It was only a matter of time before Will killed again. If he had Hannibal with him, he was sure he would learn even more.

Maybe it would help him with his regular job. He could understand other killers even better if Hannibal taught him.

The Ripper would have to take a break for a while, though. To get Jack off of their backs for now. He wouldn't ask Hannibal to stop altogether, but he would have to go back to ground for a while. Stop displaying them for a while.

Maybe Will would end up making a name for himself in the end. He was sure Hannibal would be delighted by that. He had already shown his work was comparable to Hannibal's, at least on the surface level. No one had been able to tell the difference other than them, and then only because they knew.

Will would like a chance to talk to Miriam Lass. He thought that would be interesting. He thought it might help him to understand Hannibal even better. He would ask Hannibal later how Miriam had found him, but he wanted to see and hear what Hannibal had done to Miriam in the three years he'd had to move around the furniture in her head.

Maybe Hannibal had been hoping Will would talk to her. Maybe this had been some kind of offering in a more direct way than he had already thought.

Either way, it wouldn't matter much if he couldn't find some way to see her.

Will puzzled over it during his first two lectures, trying to come up with any excuse to see her. Since he had set a clear boundary about not working on the Ripper case anymore, it would be a little hard.

When Beverly showed up just as his lunch hour was starting, he thought maybe it wasn't as complicated as he had been making it.

"A new case?" Will asked, fairly sure that wasn't it, but not about to reveal that to her.

Beverly shook her head.

“Jack asked me to see if you’d be willing to meet Miriam.”

There it was.

Will furrowed his brow, frowning.

“That’s the Ripper case,” he said, “I’m not working it. Why would he want me to meet her?”

Beverly sighed and spread her hands.

“He doesn’t need you to work the case. She’s been asking for you.”

That was a surprise. Will had never met Miriam Lass, and he didn’t know how or why she would have heard of him. He didn’t know why she would ask for him.

“Jack sent you because he thought I’d be more likely to agree if it came from you than him?” he asked.

Beverly shrugged.

“He feels bad, and he’s trying to do anything he can to help her. She wants you, so he wants you.”

Will considered that. He knew Jack felt bad about what had happened to her. He probably felt worse for having given up hope of saving or ever finding her, now that he knew she had been alive the whole time.

He still didn’t know why she was asking for him, but he supposed they would find out soon enough.

“Alright,” Will agreed with a nod, “I’ll talk to her.

Beverly nodded and they headed to Jack’s office.

Chapter End Notes

Not me forgetting about Miriam until I was writing this chapter and all of a sudden there she was. Lucky for me, Hannibal didn't forget.
That's going to make things a little more strained between them. Will is definitely going to give Hannibal a fierce talking to about *ahem* kidnapping.

Up next: Will learns even more about Hannibal. And about himself.

87

Chapter Summary

A couple important conversations. Or at least the beginnings of them.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Miriam's head snapped up, and she locked her eyes on Will as he entered.

She looked good for someone who had been a captive for three years. That didn't really surprise Will, knowing who her captor had been. She had not been starved or beaten. If anything, she looked a little pale, but that was the extent of her physical neglect, and could be remedied with some time in the sun once winter cleared entirely.

It was her mind that would really show the damage.

"You're Will Graham."

Will nodded and took a seat next to her in front of Jack's desk, careful of his injured arm, which ached despite the care he had been taking to rid himself of the infection. Jack watched them intently, anxious for any clues she might reveal.

"I am," Will said, "We've never met before, so I don't know why you wanted to see me."

Miriam looked him over, as if she was amazed to be there in his presence. It made him a bit uncomfortable, but he didn't show it. Her eyes were bright and sharp, even cold. The eyes of someone who had been through much more than they had earned.

"I've heard so much about you I almost feel as if I know you," she said distantly.

Will frowned.

"Where did you hear about me?" he asked, glancing at Jack for an explanation. Jack only shook his head. He didn't know either.

" *He* talked about you all the time," Miriam said, "I would have recognized you if we passed on the street. It's mostly your eyes."

Will fought a blush, imagining Hannibal gushing to Miriam about him like a teenage girl with a crush. This was not how he had expected this to go. Perhaps he had underestimated Hannibal in more ways than one. His obsessive infatuation went even deeper than Will had thought. And that was saying something.

“Why did he talk about me?” he asked.

Miriam frowned, turning away and furrowing her brow. Either she wasn’t entirely sure, or the answer upset her in some way. Will could imagine both were true, considering who had been in her head for the past three years. He felt bad for her, at the same time as he was having a hard time looking at her. He had to actively not fall into her head along with her, and feel the way she felt. He had spent enough time feeling that way, and he wouldn’t go back.

“I don’t know. I don’t remember a lot from it all, but I remember you. I think you made him feel less alone. He thinks you can understand him.”

Well, that was a bit of a relief. She wasn’t saying anything Will hadn’t already told Jack. Though, it might make Jack more worried about Will, or even think he was needed back on the case again if the killer was this attached. Jack might want to use him as bait. Wouldn’t that be ironic.

“If a serial killer, especially one who kidnapped you and held you captive for so long, thinks I’m like him, why would you want to meet me?” Will asked, though he thought he knew the answer to this one as well.

Miriam met his eyes with devastating sincerity, and Will wondered exactly what Hannibal had done to her. What kind of things had he done once he had gotten his fingers into her head? What games had he played? How far had he moved all the furniture in her skull? And to what end?

“I need to warn you. Don’t let him get to you. Once he’s in your head, you’ll never get rid of him.”

Will felt a sudden flash of hot jealousy, but he kept it reined in as much as he could. He didn’t need to strong arm her. She was a victim. More of a victim than he was.

“Do you still hear him in your head?” he asked, unable to stop himself, “does your inner voice sound like him? Is that how deeply he’s embedded himself under your skin?”

Miriam paled further, a startling change that made her look like a corpse. Will instantly felt bad for frightening her. She didn’t deserve his jealousy or anger. She would give anything to be rid of Hannibal’s voice and his influence.

“Yes,” she said, barely above a whisper, “I can’t get him out of my head.”

Will smiled, then, and he saw that she relaxed a bit at the show of goodwill. He imagined his expression might have been somewhat frightening until then. He needed to be kinder. He needed to comfort her. She needed someone who understood. He understood. Uncomfortably well.

“You will,” he told her earnestly, “it’s only been a day. It takes time, and work, but you’re strong, and you’ll get rid of him. I know you will.”

Miriam's expression shifted, showing just a glimmer of hope. She searched his gaze for something, and sat forward a bit after a moment. Whatever she had been looking for, she had found it.

"You went through something," she said, "You really do *know* ."

Will nodded, continuing to smile. He wanted her to be comfortable with him, trust him. He knew she needed support. He didn't think it would be right for him to be that support, but he could try to build it for her. Give her a good start.

"I do. And the best advice I can give you is to find the right therapist. I know a good one if you need any suggestions."

Miriam offered a wan, wavering smile, almost as if she had forgotten how. It was good to see, and Will couldn't help but empathize with her. He understood what she had been through.

Hannibal had another thing to make up for.

—

Hannibal opened the door and his eyes immediately lit up with delight.

Before Hannibal could say anything, though, Will put his hand to the man's chest and pushed him backwards into his house. He felt awful, and he wasn't in the mood to hear any of Hannibal's bullshit. He was only here because he had to be.

"I'm not here because I forgive you yet," Will said, kicking the door gently shut behind himself, sweat breaking out across his brow, "I'm here because I hate hospitals."

Hannibal's expression quickly shifted into one of concern, though Will caught the underlying frustration and upset. Hannibal inhaled softly, and Will felt awkwardly exposed when his lips twitched down into a frown. That damn super sense of smell Hannibal had.

"It became infected," Hannibal said, furrowing his brow at Will's arm, which was covered by the sleeve of his flannel, "did you not take care of it?"

Will snarled, leaning back against the door, feeling tired. The past couple of days had been filled with his fussing over the wound, trying desperately not to get to this point. He just wasn't a doctor, and he hadn't been able to win. Again, it was as if the universe, or even God, was forcing Will to take action. To go to Hannibal.

"Of course I took care of it," he snapped, "I'm not an idiot. I can't fix it on my own, but I'm not going to a hospital. So you have a choice here."

Hannibal's eyes flashed as he realized what that choice was.

He could either kill Will, or heal him.

"Come with me," Hannibal said, gently taking Will's uninjured arm to guide him through the house.

Will knew the way well enough, but he allowed the touch. He was too tired to fight it, and he knew Hannibal needed some kind of contact or else he would lose his mind.

He was really pushing Hannibal hard on this, and he knew it was dangerous. But he didn't care.

Hannibal brought Will into the kitchen, and Will couldn't help but snort softly at the idea that Hannibal would kill him here, where it would be easiest to clean up and cook him. But Hannibal led him to the pantry, making Will furrow his brow before he realized what must be there.

He hadn't even realized he hadn't thought of it. Hannibal had to have some kind of room where he worked. It made so much sense for it to be attached to the kitchen, where he was most at home and himself. The basement was where the monster played.

Maybe Hannibal really was going to kill him.

Hannibal led Will down the hidden staircase into the cool basement, not speaking at all as Will looked around at the tools he used to create his artworks. It was fastidiously neat and clean, just as Will would have expected, and looked like a mix between an abattoir and a hospital operating room. It fit Hannibal remarkably well.

It would be fitting for him to die here, in the center of Hannibal's facade, where the truth leaked through. He wouldn't mind it at all. Maybe he was always meant to die in a basement after all. The universe had meant for him to go that way all along, and Hannibal was just setting everything right.

Hannibal left Will beside one of the metal tables, heading toward a cabinet. Will didn't bother thinking about fighting or running. He had decided a while ago that he wouldn't mind being killed by the Ripper, and he supposed it would be better to at least have come to terms with the truth before it happened.

Hannibal wouldn't display him, though. That was a shame, but Will knew Hannibal was too possessive to let anyone see what he would make of Will in his death. Will thought it more likely Hannibal would try to eat every part of him, letting nothing go to waste. The way Hobbs had.

Because this time, he would be doing it out of love, the way Hobbs had.

"You will have to remove your shirt so that I can see how bad it is," Hannibal said, returning with a medical bag and a box of other supplies.

Oh.

Maybe Hannibal wasn't going to kill him.

He supposed the infection would ruin the meat anyway. Hannibal might want to heal him first. Maybe he would keep Will down here until he was better, then kill and eat him.

Will pulled off his flannel, wincing as he moved his arm and the inflamed wound throbbed. He huffed out harshly, stilling in surprise when Hannibal's hand slid into his hair in an achingly familiar offer of comfort.

Will closed his eyes and leaned into the contact, allowing himself to accept it since he might as well be dead.

He had been pushing Hannibal, and now he thought he must have gone too far. He had wondered where the limit was, and he had found it.

"Did you keep Miriam down here?" Will asked, feeling like he wasn't entirely in control of his own tongue.

Hannibal huffed softly.

"Only for one day, as I prepared other arrangements," he replied, taking the flannel from Will's hands and setting it on the table, "it was too much of a risk to keep her here for long. I promise she was comfortable all the time she was in my care."

"But you still kidnapped her, and kept her against her will."

Hannibal sighed, but didn't argue.

"Please, sit up on the table. As if you were at a doctor's office. I need to take a look at the wound."

Will nodded and opened his eyes, hefting himself up onto the metal table and watching as Hannibal pulled a tall chair over. Hannibal eyed the red flesh around the bandaged part of Will's arm, clearly disapproving. Will didn't care. He had gotten over needing Hannibal's approval for anything.

"Young agent Lass came to me to inquire after Jeremy Olmstead," Hannibal said, beginning to unwind the bandage around Will's arm, "she had found that I had tended to him in the emergency room years earlier, when he had impaled himself on an arrow while hunting. While in my office, she came across a sketch I had drawn of Jeremy, as I had left his body. I had no choice but to keep her from arresting me. But I had no reason to hurt her."

Will nodded, watching Hannibal's eyes take in the row of stitches that held together the inflamed and infected flesh of his arm. He could see the calculations going on in his head, planning the procedures he would have to do in order to flush the infection from Will's body.

"No reason to hurt her, unless Jack ever got too close to finding you," Will said, and Hannibal nodded.

"If Jack had begun to be a problem to me, I would have taunted him by using her, to distract him and drive him to the brink of madness," Hannibal agreed, confirming what Will had expected, "but I don't believe I would have killed her for his trespasses. I always planned to free her."

Will snorted, feeling his heart drop a bit as Hannibal took out a pair of scissors and began clipping the stitches. It turned out Hannibal would get to fix him up after all. The universe was a bitch.

“But she would never be alright again,” he said softly, “she probably won’t ever entirely recover from what she’s been through. And you don’t want her to. You did something to her head, and she will never be the same. She will carry it with her for the rest of her life.”

Hannibal finally looked up and met Will’s eyes. There was real regret there, and Will was surprised by that. He had known Hannibal was capable of regret, but he hadn’t expected this to be one of the things he would feel it for.

“I would that I could change the past, Will,” Hannibal said solemnly, “but I will not hide what I have done from you. I considered killing her and disposing of her in secret so that you would never know that I had kept her. I knew you would feel anger, and you are justified in it. But I have promised you honesty before and broken that promise, so I refuse to do so again. You will know everything about me, and I can only pray that you will accept it.”

Will was silent for a moment as Hannibal returned to his work, taking out a few vials of clear liquids and studying the labels as he selected a few syringes as well. Will couldn’t even look at his own arm, feeling the sight of the infected wound, now exposed, might make him feel even more ill.

“I had a notion that you aren’t the praying type,” Will said, “back when we talked about Elliot Buddish. I figure you believe in god, but don’t pray to him.”

Hannibal smiled slightly, almost sadly.

“I do not pray to god,” he agreed, his eyes fixed on his work while Will’s eyes were fixed on his face.

Will frowned.

“Then what do you pray to?”

Hannibal met Will’s eyes again, his expression warm and fond. Will realized what the answer was in the moment before Hannibal answered, and his head swam with the concept.

“You, Will.”

Chapter End Notes

So, Hannibal gets to play doctor to Will after all. Sometimes we do get what we want. Just not the way we want it.

Up next: Hannibal is finally given a chance

88

Chapter Summary

Talks about change

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal insisted on keeping Will for a while to observe his condition, and Will didn't mind. He would use the guest bedroom again, having not yet forgiven Hannibal entirely. He wasn't ready for that level of intimacy again, at the very least.

The dogs would be alright until he could get back. He had taken them for a walk and fed them just before he had driven to Hannibal's, and he had made sure Max had eaten his pill for the arthritis. They would all be fine, and he wasn't worried.

Hannibal re-wrapped a bandage around Will's arm, much more neatly and professionally than Will had managed on his own with one hand. Hannibal did it with such clear affection, the pads of his fingers lingering on Will's skin like a kiss.

He wasn't going to kill Will.

Will's head was clearer, now, and he realized the infection had been giving him a fever and muddling his thoughts. It was worse than he had realized, and he had probably been in very real danger. He was lucky to know Hannibal, and that Hannibal was willing to help. His avoidance of hospitals and doctors could have gotten him killed.

Hannibal cooked for them, offering the source of each ingredient to Will in the interest of total honesty, and he vowed none of it had come from a human being. It was jarring, the way Hannibal seemed to be making no fanfare of the meal as he usually did, instead treating it so frankly and clinically. In the pursuit of honesty, he was taking the soul from the act he usually loved.

Will thought back to the piece of Abel Gideon he had put into his freezer, and wondered if it would ever be put to use. If it did, he wouldn't want it to be like this.

He should have been more disturbed by the cannibalism, really. The idea that all this time he had been consuming the victims he had been studying. That, unknowingly, he had been helping Hannibal dispose of evidence. One of Hannibal's lies had made Will an accessory to his crimes. Will had been eating people all this time, and he should have felt guilty about it.

But every so often, he just remembered the burst of blood into his mouth as his teeth cut through the flesh of Steve Walters' fingers, and the rush of vindictive power that had come

with it. He couldn't remember if he had spat out the mouthful of blood or swallowed it, but he did know the file he had didn't mention any place where his saliva had been found mixed with the blood as if he had spat it there.

Really, the only part that upset Will was the deception. And even that was starting to feel less and less significant. Hannibal had been honest with him about so much over the time they had known each other, and the fact that this dangerous secret had been hidden was reasonable in hindsight. Hannibal had been protecting himself. He had been acting on self-preservation to stay free and alive. Will shouldn't have expected him to have acted in any other way.

Hannibal hadn't chided Will for not having come to him about the infection sooner. He likely recognized how foolish that would sound, all things considered. Still, Will wondered if Hannibal would ever stop seeming to walk on eggshells around him, now. It was as if they had been skating on a frozen lake all this time, but Will had cracked the ice. Now, they were both stuck being frightened and careful with each other, feeling one wrong move could send them into the deadly water.

Hannibal gave Will a plate of food, watching as Will took it to the table in the kitchen. He seemed unsure if he was welcome to sit with Will, so Will waved to the seat across from him.

"We're alright," Will told him, "we're not back to where we were before, but we're not strangers. For now, we're friends again."

Hannibal sat down, smiling gratefully.

It was bizarre, honestly mind boggling, that they had switched roles so entirely from where they had begun. Will held all the power, and Hannibal was anxious and awkward with him. Will wondered at such a thing, amazed that the universe would have put them together when they could become such a thing when united.

Any higher power there might be must have some interest in allowing destruction, if not actively encouraging it. Will had an idea Hannibal believed God reveled in death and destruction. That idea seemed more and more likely.

"Whatever you ask of me, I will give you," Hannibal said, the sincerity burning against Will's skin, "I will answer any questions and show you any secrets. I will do anything."

Knowing now exactly how Hannibal viewed him, as more worthy of worship than the god he believed in, Will didn't question those outlandish vows. He believed every word. He believed Hannibal would attempt to level a mountain range if Will wanted.

He remembered what Beverly had said, once. That Hannibal would try to take the moon from the sky if Will asked him for it.

She had been right.

"Give me a little more time," Will said, sighing at himself for not being entirely ready to forgive Hannibal yet, "I'm just not quite ready for this yet. Be patient with me."

Hannibal closed his eyes, relief washing over his entire body and easing the tension in his muscles.

“I will wait forever if I must,” he said, and again Will believed it, “just knowing that you will return to me will give me strength. Knowing we are friends again will ease my pain.”

Will smiled sadly, slightly amused by the pretentious way Hannibal always spoke. Despite it all, this was still something that stirred the familiar feeling of affection in his chest, and he couldn’t help but be happy he was here.

“I said a while ago that the Ripper might have been preparing me for when he shows himself,” Will said, watching as Hannibal tensed again slightly, “I was right.”

Part of the whole idea made Will angry again. He knew he wouldn’t be getting over the whole betrayal so quickly if Hannibal hadn’t been carefully guiding him to accept those darker parts for a long time now. He would have been much more angry and probably reacted in a way closer to how he should.

But it would also have been much more devastating. Will might not have felt strong enough to act on his anger, rather falling deeply into despair and depression.

Hannibal, for all intents and purposes, had been grooming Will. So he would be able to accept the truth when it was revealed, even if he initially reacted poorly.

Hannibal dropped his eyes, almost in shame, though Will knew he was far too pleased and satisfied with how things were turning out to show any level of shame for his actions, no matter how deserved.

The problem with that kind of psychological manipulation was that Will had no real way of reversing it. And the way Hannibal had done it was particularly clever, intertwining Will’s comfort with darkness with improvements on his trauma. He couldn’t even reliably identify which things in his own mind had been there all along and which had been carefully planted and cultivated by Hannibal.

Will thought the only person likely to believe him about all of this would be Fredrick Chilton, who had died by Will’s own hand not all that long ago. What a cosmic joke this all was.

“You don’t have anything to say in your own defense?” Will asked with a bitter smile.

Hannibal sighed softly.

“I believe you are aware how I feel about it, and any placating words I could offer would be a lie.”

Will appreciated his honesty, at least. But he wasn’t satisfied letting him get off that easy.

“It doesn’t matter if I know already,” he said, tapping the table impatiently, “I want you to say it. Admit the truth. Don’t keep making me do all the work.”

Hannibal lifted his eyes and his gaze settled on Will’s lips.

“While I knew from the start that in order to have you and be fully accepted by you I would have to influence change, I had not counted on the fact that you would cause a quite dramatic change in me in return.”

Will considered that in silence for a moment. The idea that he had changed Hannibal managed to soothe his nerves, and he was amused.

“When we first met, you could have killed me easily and not felt a moment of regret, couldn’t you?” he asked.

Hannibal huffed softly, his lips twitching up in a small smile.

“Imagine all the trouble I might have avoided,” he said.

Will laughed. He couldn’t help it. The idea that Hannibal found his feelings inconvenient was just so fitting to the man’s character. He was so accustomed to being above it all, and the idea that he cared must have been almost offensive.

“We both would have,” he said, still grinning, “when did you realize that had changed? That you didn’t want to kill me?”

Hannibal sighed and nodded, as if he had been expecting that question.

“It was likely when I was speaking with Fredrick Chilton regarding Abel Gideon,” he said, “When I felt so strongly compelled to defend you against his words, despite how it might affect my reputation, I was entirely taken aback. And when you chided me for not allowing you the space to defend yourself, I recognized how much of an inconvenience it could be. Because I wanted desperately to please you.”

Will smiled.

“You were in real deep before you realized it,” he said, “And you didn’t even try to stop digging.”

Hannibal shook his head.

“I would beg to differ,” he said, “I began looking for any reason I could not love you, or must not. I asked you every question I could think of to expose your imperfections. But I found none.”

Will raised an eyebrow.

“Even now, you would claim that I’m perfect,” he mused, “I don’t know if that’s romantic or foolish.”

Hannibal smiled and nodded.

“As I have always considered most things in regards to love, it is very likely both.”

Chapter End Notes

A lot of things are coming back around.

Up next: Will deals with another dream

89

Chapter Summary

Will is still having a hard time accepting things

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will was eating something. He knew what it was. He recognized the thick taste of blood and the tear of flesh between his teeth. He was bent over a kill, the body still warm and steaming in the night air under the light of the moon. He recognized that it was a dream, but he didn't mind. He wanted to see where it would go.

The loud, whooshing sound of enormous wings flapping made him look up in time to see a large shape obscure the moon and cast him into total darkness.

Before he realized he meant to do it, he let loose an ear splitting howl, and he belatedly realized that he was, himself, an enormous wolf. His muzzle was covered in blood from his fresh kill. There was flesh between his teeth and blood on his tongue. He was a beast. A monster.

The thud came as the creature landed, and Will turned to face Hannibal, the Chesapeake Ripper. This time, Hannibal didn't hide or run from him, instead allowing himself to be seen. Seen entirely.

Hannibal's wings were beautiful. Huge and black and shining silver in the light of the moon. The feathers shifted and rustled like autumn leaves, sending small beams of reflected moonlight around them in the forest, dappling the world like stars. His skin was an inky black, not reflecting light but rather seeming to absorb it all like a black hole. Only his eyes shone out of his face, red and vicious. His entire being seemed to exude violence and viscera, despite how still and controlled he was. Will knew that was the truth of him.

A facade.

Will growled low, feeling his hackles rising as the fur all along his spine stood on end. The Ripper tipped his head, his wings ruffling a bit before folding closer to his body. Will kept his lips pulled back in a snarl, his eyes locked with the red ones of the Ripper, until the other monster understood.

Hannibal slowly sank to his knees, spreading his dark hands in a gesture of surrender.

Will stepped forward, stalking slowly. He could see Hannibal didn't know if he would strike or not, and he didn't know himself. He didn't know how he felt entirely about Hannibal right

now. He was angry about all the manipulations, and feeling like he had become this without his own consent and participation. Hannibal had made him into this, and Will hadn't wanted to be this way.

Hannibal closed his eyes, and Will lunged.

—

Will woke with a start, one hand going to his chest to feel his heart beating against his ribs in panic. He turned on the light and looked all over himself for Hannibal's blood.

He had killed Hannibal in his dream. Even though Hannibal had submitted to him. Given up. Given Will all the power. Will had killed him. Without mercy.

For whatever reason, that thought horrified him entirely. He was afraid.

Will got out of the bed and went to the door or the guest room. He opened it and stood for a long moment in the dark, looking down the hall towards Hannibal's room. He wanted to go to him and make sure he was alright. He wanted to curl up in bed next to him and feel his warmth. To feel the gentle and steady beating of his heart while Will could get back to sleep, soothed by the solid presence nearby.

But he didn't want to give that to Hannibal yet. He wasn't sure he could stand it.

Will sighed softly and walked down the hall toward the stairs. He found his way in the dark to the kitchen, pulling open the pantry and running his hand around for the catch to the trapdoor. When he had it open, he descended into the dark so complete it was like the bottom of the ocean. Or the maw of a beast.

Will turned on the light and sighed softly. He looked all around again, still a little bit disappointed in himself for not having asked about the basement when he had first realized Hannibal was the Ripper. He should have known, and it was only one of so many things he should have known sooner. He had been purposefully blinding himself against the truth for a long time now, and he didn't have room for that anymore. He had to see everything, now, and not shy away from it.

Will lay down on the metal table, lacing his fingers together on top of his stomach. He counted his breaths, listening to his heart beat.

Even though he was in a basement, the kind of place he had been deathly afraid of all his life, he wasn't afraid. For the most part, it was as if Hannibal had cured him of his fear entirely. While Will knew that wasn't true, he thought there was some bitter irony to the thought. He had been afraid that only a monster could bring him comfort, and now he was sure it was true. All the things that made him feel calm and strong came from the darkness of his mind and the actions of monsters like Hannibal.

Could Will even rightly call Hannibal a monster? Would that be entirely hypocritical of him? He felt it was the right term for what Hannibal was, but he thought it fit himself as well. He was a monster, whether Hannibal had molded him into it or he had been this way all along.

Maybe it really did take one to know one.

Will closed his eyes and allowed all his whirling thoughts to wash over him. He didn't try to catch any and make them fit into the picture he had been building. He just let them swirl around him and brush past. He so seldom had the chance to do this, just allow his mind to idle. He was usually pushing himself for answers and understanding, often because someone else was pushing him. But now, he could let things settle a little, and he could sift through the sediment later.

For whatever reason, being in the basement here, in Hannibal's home, was very calming and comforting. Will felt safe, in the belly of the beast.

Will didn't know how long he lay there, on the metal table in his nearly dissociative state. He came back to himself when he heard quiet footsteps on the stairs. He didn't move or open his eyes, knowing it was Hannibal. He didn't care what Hannibal meant to do by coming down. He might mean to kill Will at last, or he might just be checking on him. No matter what, Will didn't care.

That would probably have to be dealt with eventually. He would have to confront the fact that he didn't seem to care what happened to himself anymore. But not now. Right now, he was letting things settle.

"Are you alright, Will?"

Will hummed softly, keeping his eyes shut.

"I had a dream," he said, "I couldn't get back to sleep."

Hannibal sat next to Will, in the chair he had occupied while fixing up the mess of Will's arm. Will heard the sounds of him moving and sitting, and he could feel his presence just by his side.

"You could have come to me," Hannibal said, and it was almost hesitant, as if he was afraid how Will would react to it.

Will smiled. His chest ached at the thought of what could have been. If he had gone to Hannibal instead of down here. What he could have had.

"I nearly did. I was afraid you were dead. I killed you, in the dream. I woke up looking for blood. But I couldn't. Not yet."

Hannibal let out a soft breath, nearly a sigh but not quite.

Will opened his eyes and looked at Hannibal. He was still soft from sleep, wearing his silk pajamas and a robe. His hair fell loose over his brow the way Will adored. It always made him seem so soft and gentle. Less severe than when he combed it back so harshly.

"Do you understand how deep it hurt, Hannibal?" Will asked, and saw sorrow flit over Hannibal's features.

“I thought I did at the start,” Hannibal confessed, “but I believed I knew everything. I thought I could predict you, even despite my assertions that I could not. I was frustrated that you were not recovering from the shock as quickly as I wanted.”

Will smiled again, softly.

“Because you’re a control freak, cher. You never tried to control me before, because I never did anything you really objected to. Now that I’m not following your little plan, you have been wanting to control me. I know. You’ve never even been rough with me before you came by my classroom to demand answers. Because you didn’t want to scare me until then.”

Hannibal was listening intently, his eyes wide and sorrowful. He didn’t look like he even wanted to object, though this must have hurt his pride more than a bit. He hadn’t ever really liked being called a control freak before, despite how Will had told him it was a good thing. It seemed Hannibal had reached a point where he was really open to hearing what Will had to say. That was good.

“Too bad you don’t scare me anymore,” Will said, closing his eyes and facing the ceiling again, “of all the things in the world, you’re one thing that doesn’t scare me at all. Even if you decide to kill me, I’m not afraid. I told you before how lovely I imagine you would make it if you were to kill me. Now that I understand you better, I know you wouldn’t display me how I imagine, but I still trust you to do it. I’m not afraid of you killing me. Nothing you could do to me scares me.”

“Will,” Hannibal said, and his voice was strained with emotion, “I could not kill you if it was the only way to save my own life or preserve my own freedom. Not now.”

Will shook his head slightly.

“I don’t really believe that,” he said, “I think there’s a limit to your love. Maybe that’s why I’m hesitant to go back to the way we were. I always thought there would be an end to it, and I guess I haven’t changed my mind. You’ll stop loving me eventually, and I know that’s going to hurt both of us.”

Hannibal was silent. Will guessed he was hurt by the words. How many scars would each of them wear before this was over? Will didn’t know if they were even capable of really being kind to each other. Not anymore.

“Before, I thought your love would end when you saw what a monster I really am inside,” Will said, huffing a soft, bitter laugh, “but I guess you knew all along. If I hadn’t been open to your manipulations, open to your darkness and my own, I think you would have given up on me. If I don’t play the role you want me to, I think you’ll give up anyway. When I’m not worth the effort anymore.”

Hannibal stood, and Will opened his eyes again. Looking up at Hannibal, Will saw that he really was deeply hurt. He was trying to put on a mask of indifference, but he seemed to be having a hard time with it. Maybe he was finally realizing that Will wasn’t perfect. Not worthy of worship. That would be the end of everything.

“I should look at your arm again,” Hannibal said, almost managing to sound clinical, “And as it is morning, you should return to the dogs.”

Hannibal retrieved his medical kit again as Will sat up on the table. He pulled up his sleeve a bit to give Hannibal easier access, and Hannibal resumed his seat.

“You’re jealous you’re not the one who gave me my first scar, aren’t you?” Will asked, trying to lighten the mood a bit.

Hannibal stared resolutely at the spot on Will’s arm that was slowly being revealed as he unwrapped the bandage.

“I am jealous that anyone other than me is allowed to look upon you, or hear your voice,” he said soberly, “I am jealous that anyone else has been in your presence at all. To think that any person has laid hands on you in any way makes the blood in my veins burn with rage. That you did not ask me to care for you is the hardest reminder of the damage I have done.”

That was what Will had wanted. He had known it would hurt Hannibal, and that was part of why he had done it.

Will hissed as Hannibal’s thumb brushed over the fresh row of stitches. It didn’t hurt as much as it had just the day before, and it wasn’t hot anymore. It was already getting better.

If Will was getting what he wanted, why didn’t that make him happy?

“I’ve prepared a written regimen you must follow, along with the medication you will need. You must take all the pills, and I will want to be kept updated on your progress,” Hannibal said, cleaning away the drying blood and discharge.

Will was surprised. Hannibal didn’t expect Will to want to see him again soon. He expected Will to go home and heal by himself. Will hadn’t meant to give him that impression, but he wouldn’t say anything to the contrary. He didn’t really know what he meant to do.

“Alright,” he said, “thank you.”

Hannibal smiled sadly, fastening the wrapped bandage in place.

Then, he leaned forward and pressed a kiss on the bandage, so feather light Will didn’t even flinch.

Will was stunned into silence at the gesture, his chest aching. He wanted everything he’d had before. He wanted Hannibal, despite his lies and betrayal. He wanted him even more now, knowing what he was.

“Safe travels, Will,” Hannibal said, handing him a paper bag and turning away.

Will watched Hannibal walk back up the stairs in silence, mute with want.

Chapter End Notes

Does Hannibal deserve to be tortured like this? That's subjective, of course. Plenty of hurt has been exchanged between them.

Up next: Will takes some time to sort out his thoughts and feelings. With a little help and encouragement.

90

Chapter Summary

Will is starting to come around to some solid decisions

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will couldn't stop thinking about the kiss.

Hannibal had kissed him plenty, and he had kissed Hannibal plenty. Back before everything had gone to hell. But the way Hannibal had pressed his lips to the bandage, reverent and apologetic, not asking for anything in return, wouldn't leave his mind.

Who do you pray to?

You, Will.

Will believed it. Hannibal saw Will as a deity. Something worthy of worship. Hannibal prayed to him, made sacrifices to him, and obeyed his words. Hannibal would make a god of him, if Will let him.

Was that not love? Perhaps a form most people were unversed in, but love all the same. A love so intense it would burn anyone who came too near. A love that had burned Will himself, the first time he had realized its nature. An all consuming, dangerous kind of love. The kind of love that could destroy the world.

Will craved it.

Despite everything he had always been taught to want, tried to want, Will wanted what Hannibal could give him. He didn't want anything else in the world.

Max slowly padded over and set his head in Will's lap, making Winston shift in his position at Will's feet to make room for the other dog. Max wagged his tail gently, grinning up at Will.

Will smiled right back, scratching between Max's ears as he continued to puzzle over his situation.

He thought Hannibal knew now that he couldn't do anything like that to Will again. Will wouldn't give him a third chance if he did. He thought Hannibal understood that he was lucky to be getting a second chance at all, given what he had done. He thought it would be safe enough to go back to him, to accept Hannibal back into his life.

Beverly had worried Hannibal was abusive.

In a way, the manipulation could have been classified as emotional abuse, surely. That being said, being removed from him hadn't given Will the sense that he had escaped abuse. When he had been free of Steve Walters, Will had known he had escaped abuse. He never forgot it. But with Hannibal, he only yearned to go back. That might just have been on account of the emotional nature of the manipulation rather than physical, though Steve Walters had certainly dabbled in that as well.

Will might have been able to parse the truth out if he had someone to talk to about it. A psychiatrist, or a friend. Someone other than Hannibal.

Things being as they were, Will would have to deal with it by himself. Do what he thought was best. Or, what he thought he wanted to do, regardless of logical bearing.

And he had known from the beginning how this would end, really. If Hannibal didn't kill him, which he knew probably wasn't going to happen, Will knew where they would end up. He would go to Hannibal. He would accept it. He would embrace his own darkness so he would be able to coexist with the monster that lived in Hannibal's skin.

Will thought back to his most recent dream, smiling at what could be considered unbelievably obvious symbolism.

A raven and a wolf. He should have seen it sooner. His own mind had been telling him how this would end all along. Hannibal had dubbed him a wolf, and Will had lent the image of a raven to the Ripper, perhaps encouraged by Hannibal's intentional use of winged imagery in his kills. Will knew Hannibal had been doing that because he had known about Will's past, and the significance birds had to him.

That ravens and wolves hunted together, existing symbiotically with one another in some gothic dance, amused Will. He had known from the beginning that he and the Ripper would join forces. That they would hunt together. That they fit. Will had known, and had only just realized.

Either it had been his mind recognizing the truth, or it had been a real example of divine revelation and it had just gone over his head.

Will snorted at that idea, and Winston raised his head curiously.

"Hannibal would make a god of me," Will told the dogs, "In which case, it could be both."

Winston grinned, and Will sighed softly. He got up and pulled on his coat and boots. He took the dogs out and watched them play in the rain. He would have to towel them all off when they went back inside, so they wouldn't get everything wet. Winston, specifically, would try to get into the bed and roll around in the blankets and sheets to dry off if Will let him. He didn't want to have to wash all the bedding.

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“How you doin’, hon?” Macy asked, sounding concerned.

“Actually, a lot better,” he said, smiling a bit, “better enough that I’m thinking of forgiven’ Hannibal, and I thought I should let you know in case you were still planning to break his kneecaps.”

Macy laughed softly, but Will could tell she wasn’t entirely convinced.

“You’re not doin’ it because you think you need him, are you?” she asked, “because you don’t.”

Will nodded, sliding the last book onto the shelf. His library was finished, and he was pleased with how it had turned out. He planned to turn another of the second floor rooms into a little workroom for his fishing gear, with his desk for tying flies. It would give him and the dogs more room in the main area.

“I’m not doing it because I can’t live without him,” he reassured Macy, “I’ve had some time to think it over, and while I’m still pretty angry, I understand why he did what he did. I don’t think he’ll hurt me again, and he knows I only give one second chance.”

Macy hummed.

“Alright, but don’t you let him take advantage of you. You deserve better.”

Will didn’t think there was anything better than Hannibal. Not for him. But he understood what she was saying.

“I won’t. How you doin’? Gone back north?” he asked.

Macy scoffed.

“Nah. I’m done with yankees for now. I think I’ll stay here, in Pa’s place. At least until Mardi Gras. Then, I’ll decide where I’m headed next. Who knows? Maybe I’ll meet somebody nice.”

Will grinned.

“Someone actually nice, this time, I hope,” he teased, “Jason was no good. I can’t imagine what you saw in him.”

Macy laughed.

“Well, it certainly wasn’t his personality,” she said, “he was sure hot, though. I guess I should be more discerning in the future. Stop getting myself into trouble now that Pa’s not around to chase off the mongrels. That’s a lot less fun, though.”

Will huffed a laugh.

“Sure is. Don’t worry too much, though. I can always come chase them off with my shotgun if you need it. Did it once with Hannibal.”

Macy screeched with laughter, and Will had to pull the phone away from his ear for a moment. He couldn't stop smiling.

"Boy! I would pay to see that! I wish you'd taped it! God, what a trick. I would have liked to see his face when he was staring down the double barrel of your shotgun. Ain't no man get to mess with you. You keep him in line that way, too. He won't soon forget it."

Will grinned. He was sure Hannibal wasn't about to forget it, though probably not for the reasons Macy would expect. Her support was a relief, and it made him feel better about the things he was deciding to do. Even though he knew she wouldn't agree with him if she knew all the facts, the way she was willing to back him without knowing everything meant a lot to him.

"I wish your daddy were around, so I could ask him for advice," Will admitted, sorry to be bringing the mood down, but needing to say it. "He always knew exactly what to say to me to get me thinking straight again. I miss him awful."

Macy sighed, and Will could hear how sad she really was. She was good at hiding it, pretending to be fine and happy. But she was still hurting, and she needed a friend nearly as bad as he did. He was sorry he was so wrapped up in his own stuff and couldn't be there more for her, but he was glad to know they could both find company in each other.

"I wish he was here, too," Macy said, and Will thought she might be about to cry, "he would tell me what to do without a hint of doubt about it. Even when he didn't know squat, he would always act like he knew exactly the answer to everything. He could sure make you feel better about anything, the way he was so sure of himself."

Will huffed a sad laugh, nodding to himself. That had been the biggest thing about Lirette, the way he had always inspired confidence in him. Like he had the answers. He had only been a man, Will knew, but he had seemed so much more. All those years.

"I guess we always have to find our own way, eventually," Will said with a sigh, "but goddamn, he cut us loose late in the game, huh? Almost mean of him."

Macy hummed her agreement, and Will wished he knew how to make her feel better.

"You've been findin' your own way for years already, Will," Macy said, "I'm the one who finally has to grow up. I've been acting like a child for far too long, knowing my Pa would catch me if I ever fell down and scraped my knee. Time to stop playing and act like a grown up."

Will smiled sadly. He was sure she would do just fine. He was worried about himself, though. He had already fallen so far from grace, where Lirette was concerned. He had become the kind of person Lirette would have worked hard to put in prison. If Lirette could see him now, he would surely be ashamed.

But there was no reason Macy needed to know that now. Hopefully not ever.

“You’ll do a fine job of it, Macy,” he told her, “you have all the tools you need to really get far. I’ll try to make it down to see you sometime, if you want. If not, I get it. I’m just the weird guy who knew the family.”

Macy laughed, and she seemed to be feeling better, at least a little.

“Don’t you say that,” she chided, “you’re part of the family, no matter what. You better come on down to see me, and if you still have Hannibal on your hip he’s welcome to come too. But I might give him a little talking to about hurting your feelings, ‘cause I told him not to.”

Will laughed.

“At the funeral? You really took time out of your daddy’s funeral to tell my beau not to hurt me? That’s what you needed him for? I swear to god, you have some guts.”

The idea that Macy, little Macy, had taken aside the Chesapeake Ripper, to give him the old talk about dating Will, was hilarious. Almost as funny as the idea that she would slash the Ripper’s tires if Will just gave her the go ahead.

“I had a couple things to say to him,” Macy defended, “but one of them was that I intended to keep up the tradition my pa had always upheld. No one hurts one of us, without the rest rising up to help. That’s what I was always taught.”

“Yeah?” Will asked, “And what else did you have to say to him?”

Macy laughed.

“Ask him yourself, boy. I ain’t spilling nothing. If he’s still your man, you go and talk to him. I gotta go, but it was real nice talking to you again, Will. I hope we talk more soon.”

Will agreed.

Chapter End Notes

Ah, Macy. My darling. In Lirette's absence, I've grown rather attached to her. She's a lot like Beverly. Hopefully nothing bad happens to her *^^*

Up next: Alana makes yet another apology

91

Chapter Summary

A word from a new friend, and an old one.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Things had been quiet in the FBI recently. That was nice for Will, because it meant he could focus entirely on teaching his class. The students had been responding to his new confidence and personability. He had seen a huge improvement in their work, and they were more enthusiastic about learning. He was pleased.

They were about to go on spring break, though, and Will would be alone if he didn't fix things with Hannibal before then. He would be left on his own with his dogs.

While that had been enough for him for many years, it wasn't any more. Will needed to have Hannibal.

And Hannibal was probably not doing very well right now, either. Even though the weather was warm again, he hadn't been allowed to see Will in weeks. He didn't know how Will was, aside from knowing he was keeping up with his work because Jack and Beverly had both been quiet on the subject. If Will were missing or seriously ill, one of them would have mentioned something to Hannibal about it. Because he was Will's keeper.

And Will was his, now.

Will was surprised when Alana appeared in his doorway as class ended, smiling awkwardly and waiting for the students to leave. Will was curious about why she would be here, especially because she didn't seem angry.

She would let him know, though. She was an honest person by default, he thought.

"It's been a while, Will," she said carefully, apparently gauging how he would react to her presence, "I think I should probably apologize."

Will raised an eyebrow.

"For basically giving you the cold shoulder at Hannibal's dinner party. And after that. It was wrong of me, and I can't believe I keep doing that kind of thing to you. I'm usually so much better at this kind of thing."

Will laughed lightly and shook his head.

“If anything, I think Hannibal should have apologized to you,” he said, “I had no idea he hadn’t told you about us before the dinner, and by the time I realized, it looked like we had conspired to make a fool of you. You reacted with your usual grace, and I’m sorry that happened. I thought you were angry with me.”

Alana blinked, then smiled in relief. Will couldn’t help but notice that she didn’t seem about to object to the idea that she had handled the situation with grace, which she certainly had not. But that was fine. The comment had been meant to appeal to her desire to be seen as good, so he would take it.

“I thought you would be angry with me,” she said, “I remembered the way I had talked to you before, about Hannibal, and I realized it seemed like I was trying to push you out of his life or something. I felt awful. I assumed that was why neither of you had told me. Because I made it seem like I was going to be jealous or something. I was afraid to reach out to you, because I thought you would be angry with me for the way I’d talked about Hannibal, as if he was too good for you or something. I still feel like an idiot for that.”

Will shook his head.

“I was actually jealous of you, at first,” he confessed, “I thought Hannibal was interested in you, and I was jealous. Then, I was afraid you would try to take him from me, because I’m an insecure jerk. But I’m over it. I hope we can still be on good terms, even though we’ve both been idiots about this whole thing.”

Alana blushed lightly, but she was still smiling.

“I had been hoping,” she said, trailing off slightly, “well, it doesn’t really matter anymore. I’m really glad for both of you, and I hope we’ve both gotten over whatever was getting in between us. You and Hannibal clearly make each other happy, and I want that for you both. I’ll probably still feel like an idiot for a while to come, but I’m glad we finally cleared the air.”

Will nodded.

He hadn’t entirely gotten over it, to be honest. He still held some level of animosity for Alana, possibly because of her thoughtless words and possibly for her unintentional meddling. Whatever it was, he knew he would always keep her at arms length, no matter how kind she was or how long they knew each other. He would never confide in her like he did with Beverly and Macy. She could be his acquaintance, but she would never really be his friend.

Maybe that was unkind of him.

Maybe he was realizing he wasn’t a kind person. He was a monster, like Hannibal was. Any kindness he gave was an intentional gift, an act outside of his nature. He didn’t like her because he saw her as a threat, and that meant he would never trust her enough to get close.

But she would never know that. He would act as if they were friends, and she would be none the wiser.

The way Hannibal had done.

“Have you seen Miriam Lass?” Will asked, “I think she could really use some support, and I can’t think of anyone better suited for the job.”

Alana raised an eyebrow curiously.

“I specialize in family trauma,” she said, “and either way, I really don’t think I’m a good fit to be her therapist.”

Will shook his head. He had a much better idea. A way to keep tabs on them both, and make them each less of a threat to him and Hannibal.

“I didn’t mean like that,” he said, “I just think you two would really get along. She could use a friend. And I think you could use more friends who aren’t Hannibal right now. Am I right? I get the feeling you’re a little tired of all his games and double meanings. He has a hard time being straight-forward about anything, and that can get really frustrating.”

Alana could easily take offense to that. Will might as well have told her he knew she didn’t have any friends. Just colleagues she became friendly with. He could see it as plain as day, and knew she also considered herself not exactly right for dating. For whatever reason. Unless, of course, Hannibal had been the one asking. But that didn’t matter. Will had an idea Miriam and Alana would get on like a house on fire, and they would really enjoy each other’s company.

They might end up as just friends, which would be fine. But they might find they were a much closer fit. Either way, Will would be able to keep an eye on them both, and know they were not a threat to his life. It would be much easier if they started spending time together.

Alana didn’t look offended, which was a good thing. She looked thoughtful.

“You know, it’s funny, actually,” she said, “If you spend enough time with Hannibal, you forget how normal people talk. Maybe it would do me some good to spend more time with other people, outside of work. I won’t even ask what gave you the idea, because I get the feeling I’ll be offended. I know better than that.”

Will laughed politely.

“I would apologize, but if you end up liking Miriam, maybe I don’t need to. And I really do think you two will find you have a lot in common. Just ask Jack to set you up. I’m sure he’ll be more than happy to. He needs to keep Miriam safe right now.”

Alana grimaced slightly.

“Sounds like she could also use a break from certain people,” she said, “Jack can be overbearing, and I can’t imagine how he is with her, feeling as guilty as he does.”

Will nodded.

“My thoughts exactly.”

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-Now, Will, I don't want you to try to be what you think I want. I know I told you all the time that I'm proud of what you do, hunting criminals like I did, though I guess you do a lot more than I ever did. But if you ever decide to stop doing that, I'd still be just as proud. I'd be proud of you as long as you're happy. No matter what makes you happy in the end, that's what I want for you.

I know parents always want their kids to become what they think is best, and I don't claim to be your pa, but I need to let you know you can do whatever makes you happy. If that means you stop hunting bad people, that's what you should do.

I know you have a lot of anger in you, son. You got good at hiding it over the years, but I know it's still there. You get angry at Steve Walters because you think he ruined you. You get angry at people who treat you different. You get angry at yourself for being hurt. You keep all that anger inside, and that's what really makes you afraid. Because you know what you can do when you let that anger out. You know you could hurt people.

I always thought anyone who chases monsters should not have anger like that, but I see you've been doing just fine. I just worry that someday you won't be able to hold the anger inside anymore, and you'll never be able to forgive yourself for what happens then. So if you need to stop, and do something else, you should.

Look at me. Even when I'm dead I can't stop talking your ear off. I'm just a rambling old man. If I got you all wrong, then ignore it. I just didn't want to go to my grave without telling you what I think.

Find what makes you really happy, and don't let go of it. That's all I want for you.

I should probably wrap up, else you'll never read this whole thing.

I want you to know that Care and I loved you, and so long as we got into heaven we are watching you with love still. No matter what you do, we're proud of you.

Thank you for everything you taught me.

~Duke John Lirette-

Chapter End Notes

There's the conclusion of the letter. Y'all were probably wondering if I'd forgotten about it, and now you know I didn't. I've just been saving it. I hope you liked it. Or cried. Or whatever.

Up next: Will makes his move, and Hannibal makes a proposition.

92

Chapter Summary

There are several emotions this chapter.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Will," Hannibal said in surprise, standing in the door of his office, unsure what to do, "how can I help you?"

Will pushed past him, into the office. His mind tried to replay the first time he had ever entered this room, the way Hannibal had made him feel safe by giving him space and not forcing him to talk about anything he didn't want to. The day he had started to think Hannibal might be a safe person for him.

How wrong he had been.

"I probably need another psych eval," Will said bitterly, "I *have* to be crazy."

Hannibal shut the door, watching Will as he began making a circuit around the room, looking around at everything. This place echoed with memories, and Will let them wash over him in the face of the decision he had made.

"You are not crazy, Will," Hannibal said.

Will scoffed.

"You're one to talk," he said, "but I know exactly what you would say about that. If anyone asked, you would confidently say that *psychopaths* are not crazy either. They are fully cognizant of their actions and the repercussions. That's the same argument you could use for me, I guess. Or yourself. But you wouldn't classify either of us as psychopaths, would you?"

Hannibal stood by his desk, still watching as Will wandered, apparently directionless. Will felt unmoored, unsure where he was headed. He felt like he was being pulled by a current, and he had stopped fighting it for the first time in his life. Allowing himself to be swept away.

"What you are cannot be defined," Hannibal said, almost reverently.

Will huffed, smiling and nodding.

“Even if you could, you wouldn’t try,” he said, “You would be content calling me a god, wouldn’t you? But what about you? If I’m a god, what does that make you? The creator of a god? That’s vain, even coming from you.”

Hannibal frowned and stepped forward, coming nearer to Will without attempting to touch. He likely didn’t dare.

“I did not create you, Will. No more than the hungry men created me all those years ago. No more than Steve Walters created you. You are not something forged by the hands of any force on this earth. You are your own. Entirely.”

Will hummed.

“You never thought anyone would be able to hurt you,” he said, studying Hannibal carefully, “You thought you were impervious to everything.”

Hannibal nodded.

“I was immune to outside influence, until I met you,” he said.

Will shook his head.

“I’m crazy,” he muttered under his breath.

Then, before he could change his mind, Will stepped forward and took hold of Hannibal’s tie. He pulled him close, their faces only inches apart.

“Don’t you ever play games with me again, Doctor Lecter,” Will growled, watching as Hannibal’s pupils blew wide, “I will kill you next time.”

Will pulled him into a kiss, then, and sealed his own fate.

He was choosing Hannibal, over the morals he had spent so many years trying to uphold. Over Jack and the FBI and the law. Over Lirette and his daddy, who would have been ashamed to see him fall so far out of grace. Over the entire world. Hannibal belonged to him, and he belonged to Hannibal.

“I would let you,” Hannibal breathed when they broke apart.

Will smiled.

“I know you would.”

—

“Come with me to the opera,” Hannibal said.

Will considered it.

“I suppose you’d want to buy me a suit for it,” he said, “dress me up how you want.”

Hannibal smiled, pressing a kiss to the back of Will's hand. He looked so soft and harmless in the glow of the fire.

"If you would permit me," he said, "but I would not want to control you."

Will snorted.

"So, you *can* be taught," he said, "I imagine there are quite a few people who would have their minds completely blown to see that. You, who have been above it all for so long. If you can behave, I'll go with you. You'd better keep that in mind until then."

Hannibal smiled and stroked his thumb across the back of Will's hand. That was as much physical contact as Hannibal was allowed most days. Will hadn't allowed him to get as close as they used to be. Not yet. But Hannibal took full advantage of the little he was given, holding Will's hand if it was ever free, and lavishing it with attention.

Will was struggling with it all, if he was honest with himself. He wanted to give in entirely and let Hannibal love him like he so clearly wanted to. But Will couldn't shake the fear that it was all a lie. That he would look into Hannibal's eyes one night and see the truth of it, and see that Hannibal had made a fool of him all over again. Will knew he couldn't save himself, but he didn't want to get to the point where he would rather kill them both than deal with reality as it was.

"You have become so rude," Hannibal said fondly, "you wear confidence so well that I cannot help but adore even your discourtesy. When directed at me, I will take whatever you give."

Will chuffed.

"You really can't just commit to anything, can you?" he asked, "killing and eating the rude was your whole thing, but now you make an exception? The FBI would have a field day with that idea. Maybe I should write a paper and publish it, just to see them fight like animals."

Hannibal chuckled softly.

"You call me manipulative and cruel, yet you play with others just as easily as I, and far more sadistically. Perhaps someday you will recognize the hypocrisy in your actions and words."

Will frowned.

Hannibal was right. Even before Will had learned the truth, he had been manipulating people. Just like Hannibal did. He had manipulated Jack, lying to him and hiding things from him. He had manipulated all of Hannibal's dinner guests. He had manipulated Freddie Lounds. He had even manipulated Hannibal, though he guessed Hannibal had probably been entirely aware of it at the time. He didn't really have a moral high ground here. He never had.

Will was upset about the lying, when he had been lying and hiding things, too. Things he wouldn't have had to hide or lie about if Hannibal had told him the truth from the start.

But when would it have been a better time for Hannibal to tell him? How did he realistically think that would have played out?

Not when they first met, obviously, but when Hannibal had realized how he felt about Will, maybe. Before they had gotten so tangled in each other. Before Will had let down every single wall for him. Before Will would have felt trapped.

Because Will had only started really manipulating things when he had been afraid of losing what he had. Before then, he had followed all of his own rules. He had been honest and genuine with people as much as he could. He hadn't been playing any games until Hannibal had dragged him into it.

"You decided you wanted me before I showed that I could do that," Will said bitterly, "you were the reason I started, because you gave me something I didn't want to lose. You gave me no choice."

Hannibal studied Will seriously, the firelight flickering in his warm maroon eyes.

"I have never forced your hand, Will," he said calmly, "and you know so. I could not control you if I wanted, and I have never wanted to."

Will rolled his eyes.

"Even when I had you at the business end of my shotgun?" he challenged, "you wouldn't have wanted to make me drop it and kill you with my hands? Don't lie, Hannibal. I saw the way you looked at me."

Hannibal was quiet and considering for a moment.

"While I always have an ideal in mind when I interact with you, I would never deny you your ability to choose. And I have often been surprised that my ideal could pale in comparison to what you offered. I have learned not to wish control over you, just as I revel in the idea that I could not in any case."

Will accepted that. He had wanted to hurt Hannibal with what he was saying, even though he knew they wouldn't ever be separated again. Maybe Hannibal had managed to come to an understanding that Will would try to hurt him this way, and was handling it with his usual grace. Will could see that Hannibal wasn't as vulnerable with him as he had been before, though there weren't exactly secrets between them, now. Not many, and not significant ones, at least.

"Do you notice the way you behave when the weather turns cold?" Will asked.

Hannibal tensed, apparently surprised. He turned and looked out the window, where the night was silent and dark, but warm at last. Will could see the way ghosts danced behind his eyes, haunting him because of his past.

"I was not aware I behave any differently," Hannibal said curtly, trying to hide his soft underbelly from the beast that had gutted him once before.

Will understood why he was unwilling to be entirely vulnerable in this moment. The last time he had opened his heart to Will, Will had made him kneel in the snow and beg for forgiveness. And then he had denied him that.

So this was his chance to try to mend the broken parts of what they were. If even just a bit.

“Most people probably wouldn’t notice,” Will said gently, holding Hannibal’s hand in both of his, “or they would think it’s just another one of your eccentricities. You make it hard for people to tell the difference, and I recognize that’s by design. But you’ve been hurt badly, and that hurt hasn’t entirely gone away. You become more protective, more insistent on seeing that those you love are well fed and safe. You keep your home and office warmer than is really comfortable, because you fear the cold so much. When you do go out into the weather, you bundle up like you’re going on an arctic expedition. There are times when you get lost within your mind, unable to shake the sounds of screams that have long since been silenced. You hide it like a pro, because you’ve had to wear your armor all your life. But I see it, and I think I’m the first person in a long time you’ve cared enough to really worry about in the winter.”

Hannibal’s breathing was a bit shaky, and he was pale, but he otherwise kept his composure just as admirably as Will had learned to expect. Even when Hannibal had been hurt by Will, even when he was begging for forgiveness, he had kept on *this* mask. The mask Will thought that had been the first, now the oldest of all the facades he wore. The one that was the monster, cold and unfeeling, because it was safer than being the trembling child who had found himself alone in the snow.

“You’ve wanted me from the beginning, because you saw that we’re the same,” Will continued, stroking his thumb across the back of Hannibal’s hand in a way he knew to be soothing and grounding. Hannibal had done it for him many times before. “You saw that I am just as hurt and damaged as you are, and you wanted to help. But you also wanted to be understood, in a way that no one else has ever been able to. You wanted me to see your scars, and love them, just as you can see my scars and love them. You might think it was only the darkness that drew us together, but that’s not it entirely. You know better. It’s the hurt, the pain, and the broken feeling. You killed the men who hurt you, and I killed the man who hurt me. But you know that didn’t stop the pain, for either of us.”

Hannibal closed his eyes, and a single tear escaped, slipping down his face. Will could see the mask slowly lowering, finally showing the truth of Hannibal as a person.

He wouldn’t hurt Hannibal, now. Not after everything. If he lashed out here, hurting the pained core of the monster he loved, neither of them would walk away intact. Maybe this was it. The line. The boundary. If Will hurt Hannibal here, maybe it would finally convince Hannibal to kill Will and end it all. This was the thing Will had been looking for ever since he recognized Hannibal was his monster. And Will would show him it was alright. He wouldn’t force Hannibal to hurt him again. He would show he could be trusted.

“You don’t have to be untouchable, Hannibal,” Will said, “you don’t have to always be strong. You’ve let me be weak and vulnerable with you so much, and now I’m asking you to do the same. Complete honesty from both of us. I love you, Hannibal, and no matter what, that’s not going to change. Even if I wanted it to.”

Will kissed Hannibal softly, feeling his lips tremble at the gentle touch. Hannibal was afraid, and a soft sound, almost a whimper, escaped Hannibal's throat. It surprised both of them, but they didn't address it. Hannibal was scared. Maybe he'd had similar trepidations regarding this topic, thinking Will would take this opportunity to land a final blow and do away with him. Maybe Hannibal had been expecting Will to strip him of all his defenses in order to kill him while he was vulnerable.

Will didn't.

Hannibal cried silently.

Chapter End Notes

So, they're back together. Sort of. There are still some barriers they need to work through. But they're getting there. Will still has some truths about himself he has to come to terms with.

Up next: Will is frustrated, and we get another flashback (thought we were done with those? Nope. Not yet.)

93

Chapter Summary

Will offers an invitation, and we get to see a first meeting that happened a long time ago.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Come over to my place for dinner tonight."

Hannibal peered at Will curiously, as if this might be a trap. Will wondered if they would ever trust each other enough that look would go away. If they would ever feel perfectly at ease in the company of the other.

Because this was the strangest torture, now. They couldn't stand being without each other for extended periods of time, but they were constantly on edge when together. Will worried Hannibal would decide to kill him, and Hannibal was probably afraid of the exact same thing. Will wondered if Hannibal was afraid he would kill Will, or only afraid Will would kill him. Because Will was afraid of both, though he knew he had no desire to kill Hannibal just now.

They were volatile, in this relationship. Will recognized there would be blood and gore again, though he couldn't predict exactly when or how. It was possible they would implode, self destruct like an unstable star. But it was also possible they would become something terrible and destructive. Like an underwater earthquake that would soon become a tidal wave.

"Shall I bring our meal?" Hannibal asked, and Will smiled.

"No. I have something special in mind. We can even eat inside this time, if you want."

Hannibal huffed softly, bowing his head in thanks, as if Will only said it as a gift to him. Will would allow him to think that for the time being. It was alright that Hannibal felt like he was beholden to Will, so long as it kept him from doing anything foolish.

"I look forward to it," Hannibal said, "It is always a pleasure to sit at your table."

Will smiled. He leaned over to kiss Hannibal, a bit disappointed when Hannibal kept his hands resolutely at his sides. Will could tell how desperately Hannibal wanted to reach out, and pull Will closer, to devour him as he always had before. It wasn't right, that Hannibal was just letting Will do whatever he wanted to him. He wasn't supposed to be despondent. Will hadn't wanted that.

Will took a fistful of Hannibal's hair and pulled, tipping Hannibal's head back so he was looking down into those maroon eyes.

“You’re going to go mad if you don’t start acting like the beast again soon, aren’t you?” Will asked, his tone making it a demand.

Hannibal wet his lips. There was a flash of the monster in those eyes, and Will was pleased, though Hannibal still made no move to fight or reach out. To act.

“You have made the point that we are both already quite insane, are we not?” he challenged, “how much further from sanity do you imagine I might go, if I continue to rein in my impulses? Or do you imagine I will come full circle and become maddeningly mundane?”

Will scoffed and let go, falling back into his seat and shaking his head.

“I’m pretty sure that’s not how it works, and if I were to find out, I would rather not have you be my test subject.”

Hannibal hummed thoughtfully.

“I am no longer one of your pieces on the gameboard?” he asked, “I thought it quite fitting when you chose to use us all as your puppets. You, the grandmaster of the world.”

Will shook his head.

“Then, I would be like you. Lonely.”

—

Will ducked behind a piece of fencing, the smell of the old and splintered wood finding his nose as he breathed hard. He tried to breathe quietly, knowing his pursuers were close on his trail.

He felt so stupid. He shouldn’t have said anything. He had drawn attention to himself, just as he had always tried to avoid. It wasn’t like he had wanted trouble. Trouble just always seemed to find him. Wherever they went.

“Come out, stupid!” The biggest boy called. Will didn’t know their names. Will and Monty had only moved here a month ago, and he had been trying not to be noticed. He’d done a shit job of that. “We going to find you, and beat your ass when we do!”

Will covered his mouth with his hand, trying not to let himself be heard. His breathing was so loud in his own ears, only rivaled by the beating of his heart in his chest. If he could just keep them from catching him, he would be fine. He could get home.

He hadn’t meant to say anything. When the older boy had been arguing with the teacher about the lesson, claiming it wasn’t important, Will hadn’t meant to snort his derision. When the boy had challenged him, Will hadn’t meant to tell him how stupid he was for not understanding. He hadn’t meant to point out that the older boy must have been held back at least twice. He hadn’t meant to make him angry.

It had just happened. And now, Will was paying the price for his impulses.

A few more curses and insults were shouted, giving Will a good idea where the biggest brute was, but he was getting nervous about the other two. They weren't talking, and he knew they were all there, looking for him.

A hand curled into Will's hair and yanked, making him yelp in pain as he was dragged from behind his cover. He was brought to his knees on the cracked surface of the sidewalk, a bit of gravel lodging itself in his skin through the torn denim. He reached up to grab the wrist of the hand holding his hair, but he was kicked in the side and lost his breath.

"There you are, you bitch. You need a haircut, or else you're going to look like a girl soon. Do you like that? You *want* to look like a girl?"

Will bared his teeth, but he didn't have enough breath to cuss the older kid out like he wanted just yet. He imagined what it might be like to break the bones in the hand currently gripping his hair. In his mind, it wasn't unlike snapping chicken bones, though he guessed human bones were probably more dense than those of a bird, so it wasn't likely to be accurate.

Before anyone could make another move, a car pulled up alongside them and stopped. The thugs froze, and Will tried to look at the newcomer from the corner of his eye.

"Is there a problem here, boys?"

Will's hair was released, and he fell forward onto his hands, shaking his head and taking in a deep breath. The man's voice sounded authoritative, but kind. Intentional.

"No, officer," the boy behind Will said, "we was just playing around. Will was cheating, and we caught him."

Will rolled his eyes, but none of them saw it. He wondered if the cop would arrest him for hurting the boys if he did it now, since they had stopped attacking him for the moment. Best not test him.

"Is that so?" the man asked, "then I think you'd best split up for the afternoon. Figure this out at school tomorrow, or forgive and forget. That would be even better. Don't you think, Mr. Harris?"

The boys grumbled, but each walked away in different directions, not willing to argue with the officer. Will just sat there, wishing he could dissolve into the shadows. He didn't want to be here, and he certainly didn't want to talk to a cop.

"You alright, son?"

Will looked up, and met the kind eyes of the police officer. He had crouched down nearby, not so close Will would see him as a threat. He looked upset, but not at Will. He seemed disappointed in the other boys, and sorry for Will.

Will didn't need anyone to feel sorry for him. Especially not a cop.

"I'm fine," Will spat, wincing at the pain as he stood up. He could feel the piece of gravel in his knee, but he wouldn't do anything about it until he was home. "I didn't need your help."

The officer laughed, rising to his own feet and smiling a crooked smile.

“I bet you didn’t,” he said, “it looked like you were going to go down fighting, and I admire that. But you were outnumbered and out-brawned. You look quick, but not as strong as them. They’re the jocks. I know you weren’t about to give up or surrender, but that just means you were about to get the shit beat out of you.”

Will snorted, surprised. Most adults tried not to swear around him, even though he was fourteen, nearly fifteen. He guessed he had some kind of innocent look about him that did it. It was probably the same reason guys like these thugs saw him as an easy target.

“My daddy taught me better,” he said, “I don’t give up for anyone. No one beats me into submission.”

The officer laughed, nodding.

“Just right, too,” he said, and Will realized now that he sounded like he’d been raised in the bayous. It was an accent Will had always liked. It made people sound rough, rather than smooth and pretentious. “I wouldn’t tell you to do any different. But if you ever need a hand, call me. I don’t fancy seeing unfair fights like that around here, and it’s my job to look out for the noble ones like you.”

The officer offered Will a card, which Will took with a bit of hesitation. He looked at it and saw a phone number above the name Lirette.

“Officer Lirette?” Will asked.

Lirette nodded his head, grinning that lopsided grin again. He was kind, and not patronizing. Will liked him. Even though he was a cop.

“That’s me. Keep that handy, and just let me know if you ever need anything. I like kids like you. You’re brave, and smart. You didn’t try to beat them, because you knew you wouldn’t. But you didn’t give up either.”

Will shrugged, slipping the card into the pocket of his jeans.

“I’ll keep that in mind, officer. Thank you for the help, even though I didn’t ask for it.”

Lirette gave Will a little salute, friendly rather than mocking, and climbed back into his car.

“I’ll see you around. What’s your name?”

Will hesitated for a moment, not liking to tell anyone his name. But Lirette was kind, and he was a police officer. He was supposed to trust cops, even though he knew he couldn’t always. But he thought he could trust this one. He tended to be a good judge of character, and he thought this was a good one.

“Will Graham,” he said, “see you around.”

Lirette pulled away as Will headed homeward again, planning how he would clean up his knee and finish his homework. He played the image of the card in his mind until the number was burned into his brain, ready for retrieval whenever he might need it.

Officer Lirette might turn out to be a good person to know someday. Depending on how long they stayed in town.

Chapter End Notes

Thought it would be fun to bring back the flashbacks to show you all how it was before. Before everything. How it all happened.

Up next: Will brings the monster out to play. In more than one way.

94

Chapter Summary

Will finally gets something he's wanted

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal sat at Will’s kitchen table, looking somewhat ill at ease. As if he was uncomfortable without something to do. Will didn’t mind that. For now. Soon enough, he expected things to go back to something much closer to what they had been before.

If he was right.

“Do you fantasize about killing me?” Hannibal asked.

Will closed his eyes for a moment, sighing softly.

“I think about it all the time, if that’s what you’re asking,” he said, “but it doesn’t exactly make me happy. I don’t want to kill you, Hannibal. I don’t think I ever really did.”

Hannibal nodded, as if he had expected that. Will wondered why he kept that up, now that they both knew Hannibal rarely really knew what Will was going to do or say.

“How would you do it, if you were to go through with your imaginings?”

Will served food onto a pair of plates. It didn’t look as fancy as Hannibal’s dishes, but he knew it wasn’t expected to. This meal was a promise. Something like a blood pact. It was functional more than decorative.

“Sometimes I think I would shoot you,” Will said, smirking at the way that made Hannibal frown, “just because I think the look on your face would be worth it. You would be so displeased. But usually I think of doing it with a knife, or my hands. Letting your blood stain my skin. Something more intimate. I figure that’s how it would really go, if I ever did. Because it would be like an amputation, more than a murder. You and I have begun to blur, and I don’t know if either of us could survive separation.”

Will set the plates on the table and took his seat facing Hannibal. Hannibal’s small, satisfied smile had returned, and he looked at the food with undeniable pleasure.

Will watched as Hannibal took his first bite, watching the flicker of thoughts and emotions cross his features. He recognized the taste. Will could see it.

Hannibal looked up at Will, his eyes flashing with the beast. Will's fingers itched to reach out and take hold, but he didn't. Not yet.

"Will," Hannibal said, nearly breathless, "when did you-"

"Abel Gideon," Will said, smiling slyly, "surely they told you there were a couple pieces missing. He might have been afraid, so it might taste a bit acidic, but I didn't want to risk taking one of Chilton's organs in a way that wasn't surgical enough and make them think I was a copycat. You know, I wasn't intentionally emulating you. Or, rather, not consciously. I just-"

Will was cut off when Hannibal's hands seized his face and he was pulled into a crushing kiss.

Yes. *Finally* .

Hannibal's hands wound into Will's hair, holding him there as they consumed each other. Will reached back, curling his hands into the fabric of Hannibal's suit and pulling him close. It was like before, when Will had trusted Hannibal and they had been good together.

No, it was *better* . Hannibal's hunger was so much more sharp and blatant, now. He was comfortable showing Will how truly ravenous he was, knowing it wouldn't frighten Will away here. He was kissing Will like the monster under his skin, like the man who was desperate to be understood.

He was kissing Will *like himself* for the first time.

And Will was just as hungry, just as desperate for this honest connection. He had been just as tortured by the limbo they had been inhabiting for the past while. His own beast reared up at the loosing of its binds, breaking free.

"Stay," Will growled when they broke apart for air.

Hannibal was panting, his pupils nearly eclipsing the dark color of his eyes. He did not let go.

"Where else would I go?" he asked.

Will grinned.

—

"Vilkas, do you not have obligations today?"

Will hummed and shook his head, his eyes still closed against the light of early morning sun.

"First day of spring vacation," he mumbled, "I'm free unless Jack calls me up. With my luck, he will. It's been too quiet recently."

Hannibal huffed softly, carding his fingers through Will's hair. It was one of the casual touches Will had missed the most in the time they had been hesitant with each other. It was

wonderful to be close to Hannibal again, and know it was safe to be there. Will didn't think either of them was really in danger from the other.

"I hear Alana Bloom has begun a dalliance with Jack's previous protege," Hannibal mused, trailing his thumb over Will's face until it sat just under Will's mouth, the nail just grazing his lower lip, "was that another one of your machinations?"

Will opened his eyes and grinned, lifting himself up onto his elbows so he could face Hannibal properly.

"I was hoping to help her get over her jealousy and disappointment," he said innocently, "after you were so cruel to her at the dinner party, I felt bad."

Hannibal huffed, shaking his head and pressing a quick kiss to Will's lips, as if he couldn't help himself even though they were in the middle of a conversation.

"You are sure it had nothing to do with your own jealousy and possessiveness?" he challenged, "hoping to distract her so that she will no longer haunt my doorway? You are far more transparent than you think."

Will raised an eyebrow, shifting closer and caging Hannibal against the mattress. He liked the way Hannibal looked at him like this, as if he had carved the mountains and valleys with his own hands. Hannibal wasn't entirely complacent and pliable anymore, but he still let Will take the lead for most things. He gave up control to Will.

"I wasn't trying to hide my motivations from you, sweetheart," Will said softly, "I wanted you to know that you're mine, and no one gets to take you from me. Alana's lucky she didn't try anything more overt in my presence, or I would probably have killed her instead of introduce her to Miriam Lass."

Hannibal hummed his pleasure, his hands skating over Will's skin like he meant to claim every inch as his own.

"She is fortunate indeed, though I find myself disappointed to have not seen such a vicious act of territoriality from you," he mused.

Will huffed.

"Abel Gideon was a pretty big gesture of possessiveness," he pointed out, "I could have let Jack come and get him. But I didn't want him to meet you. I didn't want him to have the chance to know you. Not after he tried to be you."

Hannibal smiled and made a soft sound of agreement.

"But it is not the same," he said, "Gideon made you angry for other reasons, and he gave you the chance to kill Chilton. If you killed Alana, it would only be for me."

Will scoffed and shook his head.

“I’m not going to kill her,” he said, “So you can stop trying to convince me to. You would think you’d try to protect her from me. She’s been your friend for years, after all.”

Hannibal smiled against the skin of Will’s shoulder.

“You have pointed out that I have no friends,” he said, “and to see you in all your glory I would sacrifice any lamb I have reared, no matter that they are my favorite.”

Will kissed Hannibal again, unable to stop himself. He should have been horrified to hear that Hannibal really had so little attachment to anyone else. He seemed almost entirely unfeeling regarding other people.

But Will only felt pride and desire, hearing how Hannibal worshiped him.

“I wanted to hate you, when I found out,” Will told him, “But I can’t. I’m not capable of hating you. That’s probably a psychiatrist trick you pulled, but I don’t care. Even now, I don’t care that you sound like what I’ve always been warned the devil’s voice would sound like. I don’t need to be saved.”

Hannibal smiled, and he was as tempting as the forbidden fruit.

Hannibal had found something worthy of worship in Will, and Will had found some semblance of religion in Hannibal. They really were not fit for anyone but each other. Anything else would be wrong.

—

The opera was basically exactly how Will expected it to be. A lot of people who thought they were better than everyone else, dressed in clothes that Will couldn’t afford, trying to get Hannibal’s attention. As if he was the absolute authority on style and taste.

That was hilarious.

“I’m so glad you could come, Will,” a woman said, and Will recognized her from the dinner party, “Hannibal has hardly come to anything in months, and I think he just didn’t want to come by himself.”

Will smiled, trying to match a name with her face. The dinner party had been a bit chaotic for him, his mind unable to stop and settle for a moment, so it was harder than usual.

Ah. She had been the one sitting next to him. The one who had startled him.

“Margaret,” he said pleasantly, “I don’t think it’s been entirely on my account. Hannibal has had quite a few projects in the works recently. A lot of pots on the stove.”

Margaret laughed politely, touching Hannibal’s arm gently, as a friend would. Will was helpless but to track the movement, a bit of venom seeping into his veins.

“You can call me Peggy, dear, though Doctor Lecter never has. He’s too polite for his own good. I hope to see you both around more often, if you’ve managed to clear your schedules.”

Hannibal smiled politely, just as charming as ever.

“I would like that,” he told her, “but it will be entirely up to Will, I’m afraid. His schedule is much less predictable than mine.”

Margaret nodded knowingly, and Will offered a shrug.

“Well, in that case, I’ll take what I can get. I hope to see you both after the show.”

And she was gone. People seemed to flit in and out of Hannibal’s orbit like moths around a campfire. Will wondered how many got too close and caught their delicate wings on fire.

“She feels guilty for startling me,” Will whispered in Hannibal’s ear, unable to suppress a smile at the thought, “at the dinner. She’s worried you’re upset with her for it.”

Hannibal turned his head to catch Will’s lips in a quick kiss.

“And you would have liked to kill her just for touching me,” he said, “you can read anyone, Vilkas, but I can read you.”

Will didn’t deny it. He had felt a flash of jealous anger when her dainty fingers had settled on Hannibal’s sleeve. It wasn’t an actionable offense, but he had felt the desire to snap those delicate bones for it nonetheless. He had never realized how wild his beast was until he had set it free.

“I swear, the next person that flirts with you in front of me is going to be dinner,” he said, and Hannibal chuckled.

“If you keep glowering at everyone who approaches us, I would be surprised if anyone found the foolish bravery to attempt it,” he said, amused and delighted.

Will smiled, feeling like he would rather bare his teeth and snarl at anyone who came near.

“It’s your fault. You don’t have to look so good all the time.”

Hannibal huffed a laugh.

“What, should I wear rags out whenever we might see anyone?” he teased, “That would be rude.”

Will didn’t dignify that with a response, and they returned to their seats for the final act of the opera. While he didn’t speak Italian, Will could follow the story well enough, and Hannibal wasn’t annoyed if he ever had to ask for an explanation. Will actually thought he enjoyed it, knowing more than Will in this specific area.

When Hannibal was beginning to look just a bit too proud of himself, Will decided to do something about it.

“Will, wha-” Hannibal began when Will’s hand closed around his tie, cut off when Will pulled hard and clashed their mouths together in a punishing kiss.

Will ran his other hand through Hannibal's hair, intentionally mussing it out of the careful style Hannibal had combed it into before they left. He bit and nipped at Hannibal's lips until he was sure they would be clearly red and abused for anyone to see.

Hannibal's pupils were huge and black when Will finally pulled away, smirking with satisfaction at the sight of his work.

Now, people might be a bit more hesitant to touch something that didn't belong to them.

"Will Graham. Did you just mark your territory?" Hannibal asked, sounding equal parts amused and offended.

Will shushed him.

"Don't interrupt the show, Doctor Lecter. It's rude."

Hannibal chuckled softly before he leaned in and nuzzled at Will's neck. Will pretended to be focused on the opera.

"You are not satisfied that I am yours," Hannibal whispered into the skin of Will's neck, "you insist on making it obvious to everyone else."

Will hummed softly in response, but didn't otherwise react. He knew he had missed something important in the show, and he wanted to figure it out without asking Hannibal for help. He wouldn't be able to stand the smug expression Hannibal would give him if he did.

"I look forward to the rest of your performance."

Hannibal withdrew, turning to watch the rest of the show, looking entirely too debauched for the atmosphere. He only passed a hand over his hair once in order to calm the chaos Will had caused, leaving himself otherwise undone.

Will couldn't help but smile at the way the social elites would react.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry this is a tiny bit late. I took some nyquil yesterday and was dead to the world when I usually update. But I prevail.

Up next: Will keeps poking at the beast

95

Chapter Summary

Will still isn't very social, though he can fake it for a while.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Hannibal, I was quite certain Will had stolen you completely out from under our noses. I’m glad to see you convinced him to join you here tonight.”

Hannibal smiled politely, his eyes sparkling with amusement at the way the man’s eyes lingered on his hair and lips, clearly noticing Will’s work.

“I could never stay away for long, Luis,” he said, “but I confess Will has been quite the distraction.”

“Indeed,” Luis said, glancing between them, “It would take quite the man to ever make you lose focus, Doctor Lecter, but I see Mister Graham is quite up to the challenge.”

Will offered the most polite smile he could muster, not enjoying the covetous way Luis kept looking at Hannibal as much as he thought he would. It occurred to him that he may have made the situation worse for himself.

“Someone ought to keep Hannibal on his toes,” he said blandly, “and I seem to be the only one fit for the job.”

Luis raised a curious eyebrow.

“Pardon me, Vilkas,” Hannibal said, “I shall return momentarily with drinks.”

And Hannibal slipped away, leaving Will to continue speaking with Luis. It was probably retribution for messing up his hair. Will watched him walk away, jealously noticing every curious glance he earned.

“Everyone says you must be a very lucky man,” Luis said, drawing Will’s attention back to him, “They all wish they could take your place.”

Will offered a pained smile, still not entirely comfortable being reminded he was the subject of gossip, though he supposed he would have to get used to it. He kept his eyes fixed on the man’s ruby red bowtie, an easy place for his gaze to rest without the strain of eye contact with the stranger. He mused that the tie was something Hannibal would probably like. He likely had one just like it in his enormous closet at home.

“Do they?” he asked blandly, wishing they were talking about almost anything else.

Luis nodded, his eyes raking over Will’s form in the forest green suit Hannibal had bought for him. Will realized that Luis wasn’t jealous of *him* tonight. He was jealous of Hannibal. That almost made him smile genuinely. Just at the irony of the situation.

“They do, though I think Doctor Lecter is the lucky one. I don’t suppose you would let me steal you from him?”

As amusing as that was, Will still wanted to bite through the man’s jugular and let him bleed out on the fancy ass floor. If nothing else, that bowtie wouldn’t be ruined, since the color would match nearly perfectly. Will wondered if Hannibal would wear a bloodstained bowtie, if he asked him to. He imagined Hannibal would do just about anything he asked, but he wasn’t prepared to face the reality of a request like that being fulfilled.

Will still wanted to kill Luis.

Maybe the stress of the night was getting to him. He wasn’t made for things like this. No matter what Hannibal tried to convince him of.

“Thank you kindly,” Will offered, “As I’ll take the compliment, but I think I’ll keep what I have.”

Luis smiled, though Will could see a flicker of genuine disappointment in his face. It was genuinely mind boggling that there were people who felt entirely at ease making such proposals. Someone like Will would never have dreamt of it. But people in Hannibal’s circles seemed undaunted by the sheer amounts of audacity it took. It was like pocket change to them.

“You are welcome for the compliment, and please, consider it an open offer, if you ever become bored with him.”

Will could have laughed in the man’s face, but he managed to hold back.

As if he had anything to offer that Hannibal didn’t. As if he could possibly handle the raging beast caged within Will’s skin. As if he would survive one day exposed to the raw flame of Will’s rage. As if Will wouldn’t quite literally eat him alive the moment he got on Will’s nerves.

“I’ll keep it in mind,” Will said tersely, relieved when Hannibal appeared beside him with glasses of champagne.

“How did you enjoy the performance, Luis?” Hannibal asked, smoothly inserting himself back into the conversation.

Luis was slightly flushed, and Will wondered if he thought Will had been reciprocating his interest. He hadn’t exactly discouraged it, so he wouldn’t be surprised. For a man like Luis, even a rebuff might have only encouraged him. But Will didn’t think Luis would cause any trouble. He was harmless, but annoying.

“I thought it was wonderful,” Luis said, clearly eager to please. Will almost felt sorry for him, seeing that Luis mostly didn’t want to be alone. “Though I’ve always found Rigoletto to be tragic, it really can be a bit of a cautionary tale.”

Will almost snorted.

“Do you consider it to be a warning against revenge, pride and wealth, or allowing oneself to fall in love?” he asked, mostly because he wasn’t entirely sure what the moral of the tale was meant to be, if it had any singular intention behind it. Perhaps a discussion could clear it up.

Luis flushed darker, looking at Will with surprise. Will realized, then, that Luis had thought him nothing more than a pretty face. No matter what Hannibal had said about Will to others, Luis had believed Will was simply an ornament for the handsome Doctor, so he was surprised that Will would even attempt to engage in this kind of conversation.

“I- well I suppose whichever one is most relevant to the person in the audience,” he said, furrowing his brow, “though I don’t really think there’s anything wrong with falling in love.”

Will scoffed. If Luis was going to play it that way, Will could run circles around him. Maybe it would curb his desire to see the man’s blood soak through the no doubt overly expensive suit he was wearing.

“Gilda died for a man who had only ever done her evil, even though she knew of his lies and deception. She did it because she thought she loved him. I’d say that’s a pretty clear warning.”

Hannibal pulled Will flush to his side, hiding a grin in Will’s hair. Luis was floundering, and Will again almost felt sorry for him. Not enough to stop, or to no longer wish to kill him, but a margin worth noting nonetheless.

“But she would not have died if her father hadn’t been out for revenge,” Luis offered, clearly aware how little of an argument that was.

Will nodded. It had been a while since he’d had an opportunity to play this kind of game. Since Hannibal was always on the same level as him, things were never this easy. And it gave him the chance to tease Hannibal a bit.

“And he wouldn’t have been out for revenge if the Duke hadn’t been upset with him for literally doing his job. The Duke was too proud and rich to consider that his actions had consequences, and in the end they didn’t. The only ones who suffered were the poor. So maybe it’s a warning not to allow any rich person to become a part of one's life.”

Luis glanced at Hannibal, as if for help. Will almost laughed, but he managed to offer an apologetic smile. No need to let Luis know he was being batted around like a mouse in a cat’s paws.

“Sorry. I can’t always help getting into a debate, even when the time and place are wrong for it,” he said.

Luis chuckled softly.

“Not at all, Will,” he said, “I was just surprised. Doctor Lecter talks about these things almost exactly the same way, only he isn’t so ruthless in his stances.”

Will raised an eyebrow at Hannibal, who offered a soft smile.

“I enjoy a debate as well, though I am not as passionate as Will,” he said, “and I fear I will never have an imagination as quick and powerful as Will’s.”

Will managed not to roll his eyes at that, instead smiling at Hannibal and shaking his head.

“I bet you can cite sources about it and prove both of us wrong,” he said, “You’re just letting me talk because you know I don’t know as much about it as you do.”

Hannibal tipped his head in concession, and Luis was looking at them both like he was witnessing the birth of the universe. Will couldn't help but be amused by him, even as his continued presence was grating on his overexcited nerves. Luis was clearly a man who just wanted to connect with someone. He was a lot like Eldon Stammets, though Will could tell he wasn’t in the same mental bracket. He wasn’t about to kill anyone. That was almost a shame.

The idea that his and Hannibal’s intense connection was so obvious to others pleased Will, at the same time as it made him feel unusually exposed. He had wanted people to be jealous, had wanted them to see that Hannibal belonged to him and vice versa, but he hadn’t really thought about how *much* people would be able to see.

Most of the aspects of their relationship should be kept secret, so Will wasn’t comfortable thinking any of it was so obvious.

That would take some time to get over.

“Excuse us, Luis,” Hannibal said politely, “I believe we have monopolized far too much of your time, and there are others I would have Will meet.”

Luis nodded quickly, casting his eyes around for what conversation he could feasibly join next as his hands flitted up to adjust his bowtie, a nervous movement betraying his insecurity.

“Of course. It was wonderful seeing you both. I hope to see you again soon.”

Will and Hannibal gave matching smiles as they began across the room, Will allowing Hannibal to lead him.

“I’m going to kill someone if we don’t go home soon,” Will confided lightly, trying not to let anyone else see how highly strung he was in the moment, “I’m getting tired of feeling like a bug under a magnifying glass.”

Hannibal hummed in agreement.

“I could see it,” he replied, “and I am more than satisfied with how long we have been here. I knew it was likely you would want to leave early.”

Will felt some tension leave his shoulders, realizing Hannibal had been paying attention to his state all evening. He should have known, and probably had known it in the back of his mind, but it was good to hear it and have it confirmed.

Hannibal quickly made his goodbyes, deflecting every objection with the skill of a lifelong socialite and actor. Will really did admire his ability to function like that, as he felt his own energy quickly waning and he was struggling to keep a smile.

Finally, they were in the car, en route to Hannibal’s home. Will sighed heavily and sagged in his seat, smiling tiredly when Hannibal took his hand and pressed a kiss to the back of it.

“You were glorious tonight, Vilkas,” Hannibal murmured into the skin of Will’s hand, earning a soft huff of laughter.

“And I didn’t even kill anybody,” he said.

Hannibal chuckled.

“There is time for that yet, if you wish.”

Will laughed.

Chapter End Notes

XD they get to be very cute and murdery when they go out together.

Up next: Will makes Hannibal feel jealous, and has a nightmare (because I refuse to let him just be happy)

96

Chapter Summary

Fun times after the Opera

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“You know, Luis was jealous of you,” Will said.

Hannibal hummed, pressing his face into the bare skin of Will’s shoulder and neck.

“I was aware. That was why I allowed him a moment alone with you. I was curious what he would do.”

Will rolled his eyes.

“He offered to steal me from you.”

Hannibal tensed at that, and Will grinned.

“You didn’t expect that, did you?” he asked, “you thought he wouldn’t be brave enough, or rude enough to try to take me. It’s not as fun when the tables turn that far, huh?”

Hannibal growled softly, surprising Will with the feeling of his teeth in the flesh of Will’s shoulder. He bit, and Will gasped with the pain, but didn’t push Hannibal away.

“You could have warned me,” he huffed when Hannibal released him, “you being a cannibal, I might have reacted more poorly to that than I did.”

Hannibal grinned, lifting his head to meet Will’s eyes in the low light of the bedroom. His eyes were glittering dangerously, and Will was amused to see his jealousy that way.

“No one will take you from me,” Hannibal said, his embrace tightening around Will in the bed, “you are mine.”

Will huffed.

“Yeah. I know that. I guess you didn’t realize how strong your reaction would be, did you? You didn’t expect anyone to make you feel that way tonight. But you were trying to make sure people made me feel that way. You love seeing me be jealous, don’t you?”

Hannibal sighed, leaning in and kissing Will.

“Your jealousy is magnificent, Vilkas,” he said, “and I admit I hadn’t expected to be put in this position tonight.”

Will grinned.

“Well, if it makes you feel any better, I was thinking about biting through his jugular and letting him die on that floor,” he said, “and I don’t mind seeing your jealousy either.”

Hannibal rolled to loom over Will in the bed, his eyes shining in the dim, looking every bit the predator Will knew him to be. Will wasn’t afraid of him, and instead he was vindicated to see that he could get such a reaction out of the beast.

“I can arrange that,” Hannibal said, his voice low and rough, his accent just a bit thicker, “I could let you kill him, let him bleed out on that very floor if you wish.”

Will considered it, running his hands through the hairs across Hannibal’s chest. He was pleased by the offer, even though he knew it was entirely selfish on Hannibal’s part. He wanted to see Will do it, and he wanted Luis dead for proposing Will leave him.

“He doesn’t deserve to die,” Will said at length, “at least not from what I saw. Maybe he’ll teach you to be just a bit more careful. You love showing how careless you can afford to be, but now you have something you don’t want to lose. I think it will be good if he can keep you humble.”

Hannibal huffed, the sound both frustrated and amused, dropping his head to press their foreheads together.

“You keep me humble, Vilkas,” he said, “but he may live if you wish it.”

Will smiled and kissed Hannibal, sliding his hands up to Hannibal’s shoulders to hold him close. His thumbs brushed over Hannibal’s throat.

“Good. I think the Ripper needs to go back into the shadows for a while. Long enough to get Jack to stop bothering us about it. That doesn’t mean we stop, but just that we don’t make such big displays out of it. Will that be okay?”

Hannibal hummed, pressing kisses all along Will’s jaw.

“Of course,” he purred, “the sounder is finished, after all. I admire the job you did on Fredrick.”

Will huffed and bit Hannibal’s ear gently.

“I’m going to pay you back for that bite, you know,” he said, “it’s only fair.”

Hannibal pulled back, meeting Will’s gaze with clear curiosity and heated desire.

“I would want nothing else,” he promised.

—

“Will, I’ve always been proud of you.”

Lirette looked like he had before, when Will had known him as a kid. He was young and strong, wearing his old uniform. He was relaxing on the old couch that had been in their house in New Orleans, a bottle of pop in his hand.

It was a dream, but Will was glad. It was like seeing his old friend one more time, and he would take what he could get. He could hear Caroline in the kitchen. It was so warm and familiar.

“You always told me,” Will agreed, taking a drink from his own bottle of pop. He was sitting in his own chair, the one that had been delivered to his house by an amused man who had graciously stayed on the porch while the dogs milled around and Will signed for the delivery. Macy had found a way.

Lirette nodded easily.

“You never let the world kill you, no matter how hard it tried,” Lirette continued, “and you never let it turn you hard. You’ve always been kind.”

Will frowned, guilt stabbing through his chest at that. He didn’t feel like he really was kind anymore. He had allowed himself to turn hard, let the darkness consume him. After Lirette had died, Will had let himself become the kind of monster they had both always tried to save others from.

“I might just have been too scared to be cruel,” Will told him sadly, “I was too afraid to let anyone see that I was really bad.”

Lirette looked at Will, raising an eyebrow.

“You’re not bad,” he said, “you think you’re bad just because you kill bad people? The way I see it, you’re still doing good.”

Will had to stop himself from arguing. Because he knew Lirette was wrong. He had only killed bad people up to now because they were the ones who had gotten in his way. He wasn’t honestly sure Chilton had deserved to die, especially the way Will had killed him. And he was always one wrong move away from killing other people who just made him upset. He would kill innocent people eventually, if they just made him angry.

And he was fully supporting Hannibal, despite the fact that plenty of his victims had been innocents. Hannibal had even done the one thing Will had thought he would never be able to forgive anyone for. He had abducted someone and held them against their will for a long time. Even longer than Will himself had been held. Hannibal was not a good person. And Will didn’t care.

Will was eating people. Willingly and knowingly. Surely, Lirette would never condone that kind of behavior. It didn’t matter that Lirette said he would always be proud of Will, no matter what he did. Cannibalism surely crossed that line.

“I’m not the person you wanted me to be,” Will said, feeling his heart ache. This was a dream, and he should have just been using this time to enjoy seeing his friend again, but he couldn’t help himself.

Lirette shook his head.

“I told you in that letter, I’m satisfied as long as you’re happy. So don’t you go trying that.”

Will sighed, looking down at his hands.

“I just-”

Will was cut off by the sound of gurgling, and he looked back up at Lirette.

Crimson poured from a deep gash across Lirette’s throat, spilling down his body as he drowned on his own blood. Will was frozen in place as Hannibal rounded the couch to survey his handiwork. His eyes were impassive and cold, uncaring that he had just slaughtered Will’s oldest friend.

“Hannibal?” Will choked out, unbelieving of what he was seeing.

It was only a dream.

Hannibal turned and looked at Will with a cruel smile.

“You don’t need him any longer, Will,” Hannibal said, prowling forward, his hands stained with Lirette’s blood. There was too much blood to have just come from Lirette, and Will realized the sounds of Caroline working in the kitchen had ceased. “I am all you need. All you have. You will never have anyone or anything else. You belong to me.”

Will shuddered in fear and horror as Hannibal gripped him by the hair and pulled him into a harsh kiss. One that was painful and wrong and cruel.

Pain bloomed across Will’s stomach as Hannibal plunged the knife in. He grunted in pain as Hannibal cradled him close, the blade dragging across his abdomen and rending his flesh.

“And no one else will ever have you, either,” Hannibal whispered in his ear, “I will make sure of it.”

Will’s eyes filled with tears and he squeezed them shut, willing himself to wake up from this. He didn’t want this, and he needed to get away.

A snarl came from Hannibal’s mouth and he sunk his teeth deep into the flesh of Will’s neck, tearing until Will faded away.

Chapter End Notes

You thought the suffering was over? Joke's on you! It's never over.

Up next: Will has to deal with this. Hannibal is a considerate beau.

97

Chapter Summary

Will doesn't have a good day

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will jolted awake, gasping for breath.

A hand reached for him, and Will jerked away, almost falling out of the bed in his panic.

“Will?”

It was just Hannibal, and he was sitting up now, concerned and confused in the dark.

The image of Hannibal killing Lirette flashed into Will’s mind, and he grimaced.

“I need a minute. Go back to sleep,” he said, climbing out of the bed and retreating toward the door.

“Will?” Hannibal asked again, now clearer and even more concerned, “are you alright?”

Will shook his head.

“I’m just going to get some water. Go back to sleep.”

Will didn’t wait for Hannibal to respond, needing to get away from him as quickly as possible. He hurried down the stairs and into the kitchen, his chest tight and his heart pounding.

Will headed down into the basement, cursing himself for not being able to get over one single nightmare. He had been doing well. He hadn’t been having a hard time at all. Even when he had been around so many people at the opera, so close to them and having them brush up against him, he hadn’t panicked. He had been doing *well* .

Will sat at the base of the stairs, staring at the cold metal table and the tools Hannibal used to dismember bodies. He felt his heart begin to slow, but he still felt chaos in his head and a tightness in his chest.

Hannibal hadn’t killed Lirette. He knew that. Lirette had died because he was old, and Hannibal *wouldn’t* have done that to him. Hannibal wouldn’t have killed Lirette, even if he had wanted to. But he hadn’t wanted to.

Lirette would never know that Will was a monster. He had died before Will had figured it out himself. He had no reason to worry about it, or feel guilty. He should be satisfied with the knowledge that Lirette had died still being proud of him. So had his daddy.

He had probably only had the nightmare because he had gone to the opera. It had been an upheaval of everything his mind and body had been used to, and had caused him to be stressed out. His mind was trying to cope with all the changes he was going through. That could cause nightmares for anyone.

Will's mind knew just where to strike to hurt him the worst.

He wouldn't leave Hannibal. He *couldn't* . It didn't matter if his brain tried to rebel against him. He wouldn't let go of the life he had finally managed to build here. He was finally happy, and he wouldn't let that go.

Will just hoped his brain would get the memo sooner rather than later. He could imagine every smile being tainted with guilt if dreams like this continued to plague him. Every step he took might become mired in shame that he could not have been a good man, no matter how hard he tried.

Lirette had wanted Will to be happy, no matter what. While he had no way of knowing those words might endorse him becoming a serial killer and cannibal, he surely wouldn't be pleased for Will to flagellate himself on his behalf. Lirette wouldn't want Will to be intentionally miserable, even if he knew.

That was the curse of love. To truly love someone, you must wish for their happiness, even at the cost of their goodness. Even at the cost of everything else you once thought a priority. Love was a curse to compromise morals on behalf of those you loved. At least it was for him. Will couldn't love with restraint, he was finding. He only loved with everything he had, at the expense of the whole world.

Lirette had loved Will, so he would never condemn him. If his love was anything like Will's.

Will sat in the basement, trembling with anxiety, for a long time. He didn't keep track of how long, and he didn't think it mattered. Eventually, the real world would encroach on his bubble of safety, and he would be forced to deal with what had happened again.

For now, he was left to sit in this place where he should have died, a reflection of the death he had escaped all those years ago. A basement had always haunted him, even when he hadn't known it was there. This basement had been beneath his feet all the while, like a long forgotten corpse that would surface again at the first flood. And it had, and Will thought he would die here. But he hadn't. Not yet. He still might someday.

When the door at the top of the stairs opened, Will expected to hear Hannibal descend, having come looking for him when he could no longer stay in bed alone.

Instead, Will heard the familiar clack of claws on the floor before they made their way down.

Will turned, the door closing again before he could catch a glimpse of Hannibal there, and was met by the sight of Winston coming toward him. That friendly face that had been there for him during the hardest times he'd gone through recently. Winston was there to help him once more.

Will smiled and hugged the dog close, pressing his face into Winston's fur and breathing in the scent of him. He felt awash with immediate comfort, and he sighed deeply.

Hannibal.

Hannibal had gone all the way to Wolf Trap and got Winston. He must have known that Will was not going to feel much comfort from him this time, so he had put in all that effort to get someone who could help.

Will's chest swelled with affection, and he huffed softly into Winston's fur.

Winston's tail thumped happily against Will's leg while they sat there, the dog happy to be doing his job and being with Will. Will again felt comforted by just how uncomplicated dogs were. How unconditional their love really was. And it didn't matter to dogs whether or not their loved ones were corrupt or wrong. They just loved regardless. One thing in his life really wouldn't change.

A long while later, Will put Winston down and stood. He made his way back up to the kitchen, dog at his heels.

—

"How are you feeling, Will?" Hannibal asked, and Will could see his concern. Hannibal was keeping his distance, wary of pushing Will too far after such a rough morning.

Will smiled, a little tired from his interrupted sleep. He was sitting on the floor with Winston in his lap, still needing the comfort the animal offered.

"A heap better, thanks to you," Will answered, "I can hardly believe you drove all that way just to get Winston."

In the middle of the night, no less, with no guarantee of a reward. For all Hannibal had known, Will would have been angry that he had dared enter the house in Wolf Trap without Will's express permission. Will could have rejected him all over again. But Hannibal had risked it in order to get Will the help he needed. He hadn't cared about the potential consequences of his action. He had just done it because it was what Will needed. He just loved him unconditionally.

"I thought I may not be the correct person to help you, this time," Hannibal said, flipping the pancakes on the stove, "but I could never leave you entirely alone. I am pleased I was able to do this for you."

Will nodded, running his hands through Winston's fur as the dog yawned.

"I had a dream that you killed Lirette," he said.

Hannibal looked up, his expression pained.

“You know I would not,” he said, a soft plea.

Will nodded.

“I know,” he agreed, “but I guess my brain didn’t exactly get the message. Sorry if I made you think I was upset with you. I just needed to give myself a minute to sort it all out.”

Hannibal nodded, though his expression was still troubled. Will thought he might also be worried about how such dreams would affect things if they persisted. It was something they would have to face together.

Before either of them said another word, Will heard a chorus of barking from the back yard, and Winston’s ears perked up.

Will frowned, glancing at Hannibal before standing up and heading to the back door. Winston darted out the moment the door was open, and Will saw that all of his dogs were out there. Max made his way slowly over and shook off before stepping inside. The old dog was grinning, and Will was overwhelmed.

Will went back to the kitchen with Max, seeing that Hannibal was tense in anticipation of Will’s reaction.

“God, I love you,” Will said.

Hannibal’s shoulders dropped in relief, and he smiled.

“I could hardly take only one of them with me,” he said, “And having a fenced back yard means it is no great inconvenience to me.”

Will huffed a laugh, shaking his head. His chest was still somewhat tight from the stress of his dream, but he knew that was going to be his baseline of anxiety for the day and wasn’t an indication of a looming attack. Today was going to be rough for him, even with the dogs here.

“You didn’t put them all in the Bentley,” he said, almost a question because he was horrified by the very idea of it.

Hannibal smiled.

“I took the liberty of borrowing your car for the trip,” he said, “I hope that does not displease you.”

Will felt a part of his anxiety melt away at that, and he shook his head.

“Of course not,” he said, “I’m just surprised you would let all of them in your house. They can’t stay outside forever, and they’ll have to come in.”

Hannibal nodded.

“Not as of yet,” he agreed, “but I have already been setting a plan in motion for a kennel to be built for them. Regardless, I will have to make a few minor adjustments to the house.”

Will was overwhelmed all over again. Hannibal was letting the dogs be a part of their future. He had told Will before that he liked them, and would put up with them on Will’s behalf, but he hadn’t expected this. He hadn’t expected Hannibal to welcome them so easily and eagerly. He had almost expected he would have to give up the dogs in order to have Hannibal. At least most of them.

But they were all here. All seven of Will’s strays. His strange and damaged little family. Hannibal wanted all of it.

“When did you think you were going to tell me about these plans?” Will asked, smiling and settling in at the table.

Hannibal brought over a plate of pancakes for him, along with some cut fruit.

“Whenever it came up naturally, or once the construction was finished,” he answered easily, “I had expected you to ask if at least some of the dogs may stay here at times, and that would have been quite an opportune moment.”

Will nodded.

“I didn’t think you would want them here,” he confessed, “I thought that eventually I would have to let some of them go.”

Hannibal frowned, settling in with his own plate. Max settled down at Hannibal’s feet, and the man gave him a soft pat.

“I would not demand that of you, Will,” he said, “You do not demand I give up any part of my life. In fact, you want to be included in all of it. I want the same, and the dogs are important to you. I want them here nearly as much as I want you here.”

Will snorted, not sure that last bit was exactly true. But he did feel better about it. He believed that Hannibal wouldn’t ask him to give up any of the dogs, and that he really did enjoy their presence.

“Alright, well, thank you,” Will said, “Sorry again for the whole mess this morning.”

Hannibal smiled.

“You have nothing to apologize for,” he said, “and you are quite welcome. If there is ever anything else you need, do not hesitate to ask. Anything at all.”

Will nodded.

Hannibal would take the moon from the sky to give it to him if he just asked for it. Will knew that, and he was overwhelmed by the genuine truth of the fact. Hannibal was not a god, thought of Will as a god in fact, but he would find some way to fulfill even the strangest or wildest of Will’s desires.

Chapter End Notes

UwU Hannibal is such a cute boyfriend. Driving hours in the middle of the night to help his darling through his panic attack.

Up next: They have a good long talk, and Beverly brings Will a new case.

I'm so sad that we're getting close to the end of this fic! Just five more chapters to go, and this fic will be over. I've put so much of my soul into this story, and I can't express how much it means to me that everyone has been so invested and kind. Thank you all, and I hope you enjoy the conclusion of this fic as it wraps up. <3

98

Chapter Summary

Hannibal and Will talk through some things.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will spent most of the day inside, his anxiety still high enough he didn't really like the idea of seeing anyone. Hannibal left to run some errands, and likely to give Will a bit of space. He was absurdly thoughtful in this time, and Will wondered if there would ever be a day when Hannibal ran out of patience. He doubted it, even though it seemed foolish not to consider it possible.

Will set to the task of teaching the dogs how to behave in Hannibal's house, where they were and weren't allowed to go, and all that. They seemed to get it pretty quickly, and that pleased him. They were well trained and good dogs, and Will knew they wouldn't cause him any major problems with Hannibal.

Hannibal returned with seven food dishes and all the ingredients Will had said he used to make their food. He had also made a stop at Wolf Trap for Max's medication. For once, Will was the one teaching Hannibal something in the kitchen. Once the dogs were fed, Hannibal led Will around the back yard, describing what he planned for the kennel. Will couldn't stop smiling.

It was just more than he had ever allowed himself to believe he could have. Despite everything, things still felt good and easy between them. He hadn't expected things to be easy ever again, much less to this degree. Things in his life were never easy for him, and he had thought he would have to fight tooth and nail to have this.

Loving Hannibal was the easiest thing Will had ever done.

—

"Do you know the first time I had a dream that you were in?" Will asked.

Hannibal hummed curiously, his fingers tracing patterns over Will's ribs. The dogs were settled on a rug in front of them, where Hannibal said they were welcome to spend the night. Will thought he might come to regret that, but he was happy they were all together right now.

"I could not hazard a guess," Hannibal said, "I can never predict the workings of your mind."

Will smiled, amused by that, since they both knew Hannibal had changed his mind on that count a fair few times. Maybe that was a testament to just how unpredictable Will really was to him.

“It was right in the middle of the Stammets case,” he said, “Before our first dinner together, before Lounds wrote that article about me, and before Stammets thought to abduct you.”

Hannibal considered that in silence for a long moment, his fingers never halting in their movement.

“Before you first thought you might fall in love with me,” he said at length.

Will grinned.

“Yeah. Even before that. It was the best night’s sleep I’d had in years, though, so maybe I should have figured it out sooner.”

Hannibal nuzzled into Will’s hair, and Will knew he was smiling.

“Will you tell me about the dream?” Hannibal whispered.

Will closed his eyes and conjured the dream again. He was curious how Hannibal would react to hearing it.

“I was only aware of three things,” Will began, “myself, a pair of hands wearing nitrile gloves, and your voice.”

Will described the dream, how Hannibal had so tenderly cut him open and gently snapped every rib in order to expose his lungs and heart. He told Hannibal how his voice repeated the words of their previous conversations, recontextualizing them to ask permission before removing the troublesome organs from their home.

When he told Hannibal how he had agreed, nearly begging to have his lungs taken from him, he felt Hannibal’s hand settle over his sternum, pressed flat and heavy.

It occurred to Will that Hannibal may have fantasized about similar scenarios. It was clear the idea appealed to him, the intimacy of being able to literally be inside the other without the risk of dying. Will wondered if Hannibal wanted to be able to take Will’s lungs from him as much as Will wished he could.

“I am pleased you identified me as a source of comfort so quickly,” Hannibal said softly, “though it is eerie how near to my true nature it seems you came through this dream.”

Will smiled.

“It was the first dream I had in a long time that wasn’t a nightmare,” he agreed, “I guess it just goes to show how good you are at what you do. After just a few months, you’d already gotten into my head. Did you know I would end up killing Hobbs, when you called him? Did you have any idea?”

Hannibal slid his hand up to set his fingers over the fading bite mark on Will's shoulder, gently reminding them both of its existence.

"As you posited at the time, I was almost entirely curious what would happen. Especially then, I could not have predicted the outcome of the situation, though I had an idea how Hobbs would behave, and the choice you were likely to have to make. I suppose I hoped your choice would either make you more interesting or less interesting to me, as I had already recognized my investment in you. I hoped you would make my decision for me, whether or not I would expend more energy on ingratiating myself into your life."

Will hummed in agreement. He had guessed as much for the most part. Realizing all the things Hannibal had been tied up in from the start had been a lot. He had been pulling strings from the beginning, and Will had mentally had to follow each and every one back all the way to see his influence in every part of Will's life after they had met.

Hobbs had been a big part of what had made Will really start to feel comfortable with Hannibal. Hannibal had been there with Will during that stressful moment, and had helped him through the aftermath of it. That had gone a long way.

"I passed the test," Will mused, "By killing Hobbs and going into a panic attack. I made myself more interesting."

Hannibal ducked his head and bit Will's ear gently.

"You also opened up to me in the hospital afterward," he reminded, "you confided that you had killed once before. I suppose that sealed the deal, as it were, and I was lost to you from thence on."

Will laughed softly.

"I expected you to be scared of me when you found out. Imagine my surprise when you took it in your stride, and didn't feel the need to tell my boss. Maybe I should have seen that as a red flag, but at the time I was just relieved I could trust you."

Hannibal hummed softly.

"I am surprised not one therapist or psychiatrist before me managed to gain your trust," he said, "I found it remarkably easy. It was clear from the beginning what you needed from our sessions, and I was more than happy to provide it."

Will huffed and nudged Hannibal with his elbow roughly.

"Thanks for calling me easy," he chided, but he was smiling, "I think we've had almost this exact conversation before. Most people are only willing to use the methods they've been taught. You used the ones you knew would work, because you wish someone had been there to do it for you. I guess that strengthened your idea that we are just like. Having those things work for me. Was it comforting, to see me benefit from all that?"

Hannibal's hand skimmed lower, resting just under Will's ribs, almost over his stomach.

“I felt both comfort and resentment,” he confessed, “and I worried that, because I was being gentle with you, you may not embrace your darker impulses. I was thrust into the world without protection or guidance after my own trauma, and I felt that I was perhaps being too kind with you.”

Will considered that, letting his eyes slip shut.

“You couldn’t bear to not be gentle, though,” he said, “because no one was gentle with you, and the amount of comfort you got from letting me have that was greater than your worry.”

Hannibal sighed softly.

“I suppose so,” he said, “you are the exception to nearly every rule I have ever followed. And you understand me so intimately. I am still impressed by your insight.”

Will let out a soft breath, relaxing into Hannibal’s sturdy form. He was pleased with the way they were now. It wasn’t entirely as soft and easy as it had been before, but that was alright. There were some things that were easier, because now he didn’t have to worry about telling Hannibal about the darker things in his head. And he liked the new sharpness to some of their interactions. Things felt more real, and less like a dream now.

“You’d think you’d get used to it,” Will mumbled, drifting a little.

Hannibal pressed a kiss to Will’s temple, and Will knew he was smiling.

—

“We just hauled a bunch of bodies from a river.”

Will’s interest was immediately piqued, and he lifted his head. Beverly was looking at him curiously, as if she wasn’t sure how he would react to being given a new case. That was understandable, since they hadn't had a case for him in a while and things were unstable in general where they were concerned.

“I’m guessing there’s something strange about the bodies,” he said, “Or else Jack wouldn’t have called me in so quickly.”

Beverly nodded.

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” she said, “And they definitely didn’t drown.”

Will considered that.

Beverly had seen a lot by this point, so it was significant that she didn’t have anything to compare it to. Will was curious, and he wondered how it would be to work in the field now, after everything with Hannibal.

“Alright. Let’s go,” he said, standing up to follow Beverly, “I’m just going to let Hannibal know where I’ll be.”

Beverly watched him pull out his phone with a skeptical expression.

“He’s not being possessive and weird, is he?” she asked, “needing to know where you are all the time?”

Will laughed and shook his head.

“No, it’s not like that,” he said, “we’re supposed to have lunch together. Not to mention, he might find this interesting, and I could always use his help if he’s willing. I promise he’s not an abusive freak.”

Beverly hummed in acceptance, but Will could see she would have reservations about Hannibal for a while. That was alright. Will could use her as his gauge, this time around. She would be his support system if Hannibal ever decided to go back to his old ways of manipulation. Beverly could knock some sense into him if things went south.

Things had better not turn south, though.

“You know him better than I do,” Beverly said, “just remember what I said. Anyway, aren’t you curious what we found on these bodies?”

Will shoved his phone into his pocket, definitely interested in hearing what Beverly could tell him before they got to the scene.

Chapter End Notes

Hannibal is so soft I want to squish him

Up next: Hannibal and Will get to be nerds together, and Hannibal is a little possessive (a lot possessive).

99

Chapter Summary

Will and Hannibal nerd out over a dead body

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

This really was fascinating. Will hoped Hannibal would come and help him with it.

Someone had been trying to preserve these people, turn them into mannequins of some kind. That was the nearest Will could guess right now. They were covered in some kind of clear glaze, and had been injected with preservatives and silicone. The way one would preserve a trophy fish, just about.

But it hadn't worked. They were rotting from the inside out.

These were his failures.

Will counted about ten bodies here, and that made him even more curious. If these were just the failures, Will wondered how many the killer wanted in total when he was finished, and if any had succeeded yet.

They would have to make a list of missing people. There would be more. A lot more, if Will was right.

Will thought Hannibal had some ideas in common with this killer. It would be interesting to see how things went.

—

"Hello, Vilkas," Hannibal said, kissing Will quickly and taking his hand, "I imagine you have not eaten yet. You always forget to feed yourself when you are interested in something."

Will smiled and rolled his eyes.

"That's what you're for," he teased, "but look at what they found in a river. All these bodies, and they were partially preserved by the killer. Look."

Will pulled Hannibal over to the nearest body on the tables, excited to get Hannibal's perspective on this. Hannibal smiled mildly as he allowed himself to be pulled, peering at the stiff and unnatural shape of the corpse.

“I figure the killer wanted each person for some aesthetic reason, rather than anything personal or moral. Nothing like that. This killer figures themself an artist, as far as I can tell, and they’re making something with the bodies.”

Hannibal nodded.

“But he discarded these because they were imperfect.”

“Exactly,” Will said, “look at the discoloring here due to the rotting on the inside. He didn’t preserve them properly, so they became ugly to him. He had to get rid of them.”

Hannibal looked as fascinated as Will felt, now. He considered the body for a moment.

“There will be many more victims,” Hannibal said, “ones he has kept. How many do you suppose he requires for his project?”

Will shook his head.

“That really depends on what he’s making. And where he’s doing it. He’ll need somewhere big and empty, somewhere out of the way where no one is likely to stumble across the work in progress. But depending on how big it is, he might be limited.”

Hannibal nodded.

“What kind of implement would you use to apply this outside glaze?” he asked, pointing at a place where the shell had cracked and begun to break up.

Will paused, thinking about it.

“Probably some kind of hose or sprayer,” he said slowly, “maybe one of those backpack sprayers for herbicides or pesticides. Depending on the killer’s background and location. He would need a lot, and want it to be applied in a pretty even coat. He definitely wouldn’t brush it on, and there isn’t any texture from a brush or roller anyway. I would definitely say he sprayed it on.”

Hannibal nodded his agreement, bending over the body without touching.

“I didn’t believe Beverly at first, but I can definitely see that you two are made for each other,” Price said, drawing both Hannibal and Will’s attention, “whatever’s going on in your heads, I really don’t want a part of it. You just keep doing what you’re doing, and I’ll do my job. Seems like you have it handled.”

Hannibal smiled sharply, and Will saw that he was pleased. He probably felt Jimmy could have put it a little more politely, but he liked that people saw they worked well together in any context.

“I imagine there are no usable fingerprints, due to the location where they were found,” Hannibal said, and Jimmy nodded.

“Water and time remove anything,” he said, “A shame, really. A surface like that would take to prints beautifully. Like glass.”

Hannibal nodded.

“Will, do you think our killer might be an agricultural man?” he asked, “that he might have such equipment already at his disposal, so that he might know already how to use it and that it is what he needed?”

Will considered that.

“You’re thinking he might be out on a farm somewhere,” he mused, “which would provide him with a lot of space, isolated, and it wouldn’t look strange for him to be buying stuff like this. That’s interesting. What do you think made him want to start killing? Has he been planning it for a long time, or did something happen to make him snap?”

Hannibal pulled Will closer, so they were both bending over the body at the same place.

“Look at this,” he said, “I would nearly call them eyelets. What do you make of them, Will?”

Will hummed, observing the holes in the flesh.

“He’s tying them together,” he muttered softly, then shook his head, “no. He’s *sewing* them together. He must have been planning this for a while. He’s been preparing. How do you suppose he kills them without damaging them?”

“Overdose.”

It was Zeller, drawing their attention away from the body.

“Heroin. Pretty simple.”

Hannibal raised his eyebrows, and Will could tell he was irked. Maybe he didn’t like Zeller on principal, since Will had complained about him a few times, or maybe he had a more specific grievance. Either way, Will found it funny, but not the right time.

“You should check the craquelure,” Hannibal said, “trace evidence may have gotten caught and weathered the river.”

Zeller wrinkled his nose.

“The what now?”

Before Hannibal could explain, Price piped up.

“That’s the french word for the fine cracks in the varnish over an oil painting,” he explained, “and doctor Lecter’s right. It might have caught something, though I don’t know how useful it will be due to how much other stuff is bound to be in there from the water.”

“We have to check anyway,” Beverly said, and Will could almost see her calculating how long that would take.

Hannibal was upset. Will could see he had wanted to show off, and Price had stolen it from him. Will wondered if he had hoped to impress the team, or just Will.

Will set his hand on Hannibal’s arm, making Hannibal turn to look at him. Will offered a little smile, and Hannibal kissed him. Will hoped that would help them both stay calm for a while.

“No more PDA in the labs, guys,” Zeller complained, making Will wince, “this is a place of science. Keep that gushy stuff to yourselves, please. Be professional.”

Hannibal turned toward Zeller with a smile, and Will all but rolled his eyes. If Hannibal hadn’t already wanted to kill Zeller, he sure did now.

“Perhaps it is cruel of me,” Hannibal said smoothly, “to flaunt my fortune in front of you. I shall endeavor not to remind you of what you do not have.”

Will closed his eyes and sighed. He didn’t need this right now.

Zeller sputtered.

“I- what the hell- I don’t want Will, *or* you.”

Hannibal hummed.

“Then I must have been mistaken. Perhaps now you will be more aware of where your gaze lingers.”

Will opened his eyes and saw that Zeller was red with anger and embarrassment. He frowned and grabbed Hannibal’s tie, dragging him toward the door.

“Excuse us a minute,” he said to the room as he pulled Hannibal into the hall.

Will shut the door behind them and turned to look at Hannibal, who was slightly flushed and his pupils blown wide.

Will huffed again.

“Stop looking so smug,” he ordered harshly, “Those are my coworkers, in case you forgot. I don’t need you making it any harder to be around them.”

Hannibal opened his mouth to justify his actions, but Will cut him off with a sharp tug to his tie.

“I don’t care if you’re right or not. I really don’t. If you have a problem with any of them, you leave me the hell out of it. Do you understand?”

Hannibal's eyes were burning with his intense desire, and Will got the feeling he wasn't exactly learning a lesson.

"I understand, Will," he said, his accent thick, "I apologize."

Will nodded, knowing that was the best he could expect right now. But this discussion wasn't over.

"When we go back in there, you are not just going to be polite," he said, "you are going to be *nice* . I want you to be so nice Beverly starts to like you again. Convince her you're a good person again."

Hannibal nodded.

The moment Will's hand released his tie, Hannibal surged forward and caught him in a kiss. Will huffed into it, but didn't push Hannibal away. He couldn't deny that some part of himself was pleased when Hannibal had been sharp with Zeller. Brian grated on Will's nerves, and it was a constant battle not to be cruel to him. He didn't really deserve Will's anger, so he tried not to let it show. As validating as it had been, he didn't want Hannibal doing it again.

He needed everyone in the FBI to have faith in them both. He needed there to never be a shadow of a doubt about their characters.

Because he didn't know exactly what the future held for them. He didn't want to make it any harder than it needed to be.

"I thought you meant to keep her skeptical of me so you could protect yourself from me more simply in the future," Hannibal teased, his fingers curling into the fabric of Will's shirt by his waist, "I thought such a tactic ingenious of you, while amusing in that I do not expect to survive past betraying you again if I ever make such a mistake."

Will huffed.

"Maybe that's why I changed my mind," he said, "I decided it would be easier to just kill you next time. In which case I don't need her help, and it would be better if she was sad for me instead of vindicated. Makes a better cover story, since the partner is always the first suspect."

Hannibal grinned.

"How right I was in calling you a wolf, Vilkas," he said, "and you have come into your own."

Will rolled his eyes and pulled away, heading back into the labs.

"Just do what I say," he said, "else it won't matter how clever I am, darling."

Chapter End Notes

Hannibal gets to be a little possessive, as a treat.

Up next: Hannibal and Will discuss how they're going to deal with the muralist

This fic will come to a close this month, and I will be so sad to see it end. But we will move on to greater things. I'm grateful to everyone who joined me for this journey.

100

Chapter Summary

More Beverly! And our boys lay some plans.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"You know, Doctor Lecter was right."

Will raised an eyebrow, curious that Beverly sounded like she wasn't angry with Hannibal anymore. That meant Hannibal had done what Will had asked.

Good.

"He's right about a lot of things," Will said with an amused huff, "it's actually really irritating. What are you referring to, though?"

Beverly pulled over a chair and dropped into it, setting two cups of coffee on Will's desk and shaking her head.

"Brian totally has a thing for you," she said, "I can't believe I didn't see it before. I thought he was being rude because he's a jerk, but I guess he's been trying to impress you. And, he's angry that he likes you. He doesn't get it. Lecter was right, and he's super jealous now."

Will was silent, digesting that information. It didn't make him happy, or angry, or relieved, or really anything. He didn't feel any particular way about it. Maybe he was a little more annoyed with Hannibal for having decided to target Zeller with it, but other than that he genuinely didn't care.

"I'm surprised I didn't see it before," Will confessed, "but I guess I've mostly been busy with other things when we're around each other. And Hannibal really shouldn't have been ugly about it anyway."

Beverly shrugged.

"Z was being rude first," she said, "it's not like he's in charge of the labs. He can't tell you two what to do when you're in there. It was actually kinda cute, the way your beau stepped up like that."

Will rolled his eyes, taking a sip of the coffee she had brought him.

“Don’t you tell Hannibal that,” he said, “you’d just encourage him. I’m trying to get him to play nice. He’s way too pleased with himself.”

Beverly huffed a laugh.

“I’ll just bet. You know, I think you were right. I think he really did learn his lesson. Sometimes people really can change, I guess. He got better. You guys seem happy together. Even more than you were before.”

Will grinned. Hannibal had utilized his freakish levels of charm, and really had gotten Bev to forgive him. Miracle worker.

“I think we are,” he said, “It’s nice to feel like we know all the really important things about each other. Before, both of us had been too careful, afraid of scaring the other away. Having everything come out all at once the way it did was not a great situation, but it cleared everything up. So I guess I’m glad it happened.”

Beverly shrugged.

“Whatever floats your boat,” she said, “Personally, I don’t get it, but that’s just me. Zeller’s probably even more jealous just because he thinks it’s unfair that you guys are both crazy hot and you got together. Makes him feel like there’s no hope he’ll get a hot partner someday.”

Will snorted.

“I appreciate the compliment, as uncomfortable as it makes me to think about, and I hope Brian has a speedy convalescence. I’ll get him a card or something.”

Beverly laughed.

“Get well soon, stop ogling my boyfriend,” she huffed, “that’s a good one. We should capitalize on that. We could start a line of cards. What would you call them?”

Will considered it, smiling absently.

“Inhospitality cards,” he offered, “for the times when “all due respect” is none.”

Beverly grinned. Will was glad he could make her smile, even though he wasn’t who she thought he was. He wasn’t the kind of friend she needed. But he could pretend.

“I just hope Brian finds someone new to swoon over soon, so he can get over this whole thing. He’s really annoying when he pouts.”

Will smiled, taking another sip of the coffee. He wondered if he might be able to find someone for Zeller, the way he had matched up Alana and Miriam. Rumor had it they were getting on like a house on fire, and he was pleased by that. It would be almost humorous, for him to become the unofficial matchmaker of the BAU, considering everything else he was participating in. He would have to ask Hannibal about it later, if only so they could both laugh about it.

—

“What do you think about our artist?” Will asked.

Hannibal raised an eyebrow. Perhaps he was surprised by this turn of conversation, though Will wouldn’t have expected him to be. Maybe he was unsure which part of Hannibal the question was directed to, in which case Will was more curious how he would respond.

“I think he is a methodical, organized killer who is very particular about his prey, but in a way other killers are not. From what we have seen, he had been choosing his victims based on their shade of skin pigmentation, strengthening your theory that he intends to make some kind of mural or mosaic from the bodies.”

Will laughed.

“I’m not wearing a wire, cher,” he said, “you don’t have to talk like we’re in the labs with Brian and Jimmy breathing down our necks. I want to know your honest opinion. What does the Chesapeake Ripper think about him?”

Hannibal sipped his wine, his eyes flashing with hunger as he met Will’s gaze. A glimpse of the beast. Will loved that.

“The *Chesapeake Ripper* admires the artistic commitment of the killer, and is curious to see what he is making with his materials. I would like to see him finish his work before he is caught, if that is possible, though I know it is unlikely we will be able to slow the FBI down very much. It would be a shame to stop him before his work is complete.”

Will watched Hannibal as he spoke, curious. His words seemed to reflect the way Will had felt about Elliot Buddish, creating his angels. He had wanted Elliot to find peace in his own way, rather than have the FBI capture him and have him die in custody.

But it was a bit different with this one. There was no indication that this killer was dying, or had any intention to do so. When he completed his work, he would not fade away into the background noise of the universe. He would continue to be, and would most likely continue to kill.

What did Hannibal want from him? Did Hannibal want him to escape unscathed? Did Hannibal want him to be stopped after he finished this first great work? Did Hannibal want to play a game with him the way he had done with Hobbs? Warn him and watch him run? Or fight?

“Too bad we have no way of knowing when he’s done,” Will said, “until he gets caught. Unless, of course, we find him before the FBI does. What are you hoping to do with him?”

Hannibal smiled and took Will’s hand, pressing a kiss to the back and closing his eyes.

“I still have yet to see you in action, Vilkas,” Hannibal whispered into the skin of his hand, “I would be privileged to hunt with you, and I think we can agree that he is worthy prey. If we can find him before the FBI, would you do me the honor?”

Will huffed a laugh. That was the kind of thing he had been hoping for, and he was more than happy to agree to it.

“We might have to work hard to stay ahead of the team,” he said, “especially since we didn’t start out the case withholding any information we figured out. We either have to trip them up or send them on a goose chase, unless we figure it out really fast.”

Hannibal hummed, nuzzling against Will’s hand like one of the dogs. Will would have laughed at him for it if he didn’t look so damn adorable doing it.

“I have huge faith in our ability to outpace them,” he said, “You are already always so far ahead of everyone else, with our combined efforts I do not foresee any difficulty.”

The fact that Hannibal continued to lavish him in praise and compliments all the time in regards to the work had surprised Will at first. He had thought the mere fact that it had taken him that long to figure Hannibal out, and the way he had reacted when he did, would have curbed that impulse in the other man at least a bit. Instead, it seemed to have done the opposite, making Hannibal all the more likely to brag about Will’s abilities to anyone who would listen to his ranting.

It was cute, and Will felt like it was another thing he should try to do in return for Hannibal, despite how patronizing it felt when he tried. He supposed he would just have to practice. It came naturally to Hannibal, but not Will.

“It feels like this is going to be more improvisation than you normally do,” Will said, “does that make you nervous? You won’t have as much control over how things turn out.”

Hannibal grinned.

“In learning to love you properly, I have also learned to enjoy a loss of control at times,” he said, “and if I attempted to control every variable of this encounter, I would have to control you. I would not do such a thing, and you know I am not entirely capable of it, either.”

Will shrugged.

“I guess I’m glad you want to include me in this whole thing,” he said, “I almost imagined you would just start bringing dead things home, like a cat.”

Hannibal huffed a soft laugh and released Will’s hand to resume eating. His eyes sparked red like the embers of a fire, and Will could see he was entirely honest in his amusement and his plans for the future.

It was a constant reassurance that Hannibal continued to plan for the both of them to be together well into the future. In Hannibal’s mind, there didn’t seem to be an end to this unless one or both of them died.

And that was comforting.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 100 everybody! We all deserve a nice round of applause for getting here. Or a cookie or something.

Up next: Roland Umber and James Gray

Only two more chapters to go! We're well and truly in the homestretch here, and again I would like to thank everyone who's come with me on this journey.

101

Chapter Summary

Murder husband hunting together, with a little changing POV

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Another body washed up, this time nowhere near where the first batch was found. We already have Doctor Lecter down at the labs taking a look. You interested?"

Will looked up at Jack, amused that he had finally gotten up the courage to come talk to Will himself. It had been a while since Jack had been in Will's lecture hall, and seeing him there called to mind the day Jack had first asked for Will's help with the Hobbs case. It felt like it had been a lifetime ago, though Will recognized it had been only just over a year.

And Jack had no idea the kinds of changes Will had experienced in that time.

"Yeah," Will said, "just let me gather my things. There's going to be something different about this body. I don't know what yet, but there's something. Tell me everything on the way. I want to be caught up as much as I can before Hannibal and I start floating ideas."

Jack obliged, seeming pleased with how easy Will was taking everything now. Will realized it was seriously impressive how far he had come in the short time since he had met Hannibal, not even including his darker tendencies. He wasn't cured by any stretch of the imagination. He still had his bad days. But his bad days looked a lot like what he used to consider his good days, and his new good days had been entirely beyond his imagination before.

If Jack could see the improvement as much as Will expected he did, the man must think Hannibal was a real miracle worker. And he didn't know the half of it.

Jack explained the different location, and that it looked like this body had been torn free of whatever he had been sewn into by the killer. Will was fascinated, and he already had a strong theory before they got to the labs, but he wanted to know what Hannibal thought about it.

Walking in, Will's eyes were drawn to Hannibal first and foremost, always. Hannibal's eyes flashed, and Will knew they were close. Hannibal was excited too.

"I believe we have what we need," Hannibal whispered, pulling Will close to the table with a hand on his waist, "look."

Will did, and he saw.

This one had survived the overdose. He had torn himself free from the artwork. He wasn't imperfect. He hadn't been discarded. He had escaped. Only to die and end up here anyway. But that meant there was more likely to be usable evidence. They could find the killer, and as long as they were quick, Will was confident they could get to him first.

Will spent a few minutes studying the body, making sure Hannibal had all the pictures and notes. He voiced only a few, surface level observations, careful not to let the team get too far before Hannibal and he could beat them to the punch.

"It is just about time for your lunch hour, is it not?" Hannibal asked innocently, "shall we go theorize over a meal, and leave the scientists to their work?"

Will grinned, amused by the way Zeller wrinkled his nose. Beverly was pleased, though, and Jack looked far from displeased. In his mind, they were the dream team, and they were getting to work on this new puzzle. Everything was going right for Jack.

"Yeah," Will said with a nod, "let's get out of their way."

Hannibal took Will's hand, kissing him softly, and they went out of the labs to have lunch together.

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"I could smell corn," Hannibal said, "corn and pesticides. Our killer is in a cornfield, most likely in a barn or empty silo."

Will nodded.

"If we follow the current patterns in the waterway where he was found, I'll bet we'll find a cliff next to a cornfield," he said, "if our guy had caught him, he would have just put him right back. A cliff is one easy way to get away so you can't get got again, but he took quite the tumble, going off the damage. I figure, if we hurry, we can find him before they even find corn plant fibers in the craquelure, as you so helpfully guided them to do."

Hannibal grinned and kissed Will.

"We must be helpful, or else we will not have opportunities like this again," he pointed out, "and we had not yet discussed our options. I expect you are correct, and I will begin the search immediately. You may decide how he is to be approached, if you would like."

Will *would* like, actually. He liked the idea that Hannibal would let him take the lead on this. It wasn't exactly a hunt, but what Hannibal did very rarely resembled hunting these days. In his salad days, perhaps, he had been more of the beast. Now, Will was the wild one, yet to be tamed and trained.

Will wondered if Hannibal would ever try to tame him. He would definitely train him on his methods, so they were better able to work together without getting caught. But Will didn't think Hannibal would try to make Will any less wild. If anything, they were going to mesh their styles, playing off each other's strengths and compensating for each other's weaknesses.

They already worked so well together in other ways, and Will thought they would be able to do so on this as well.

This would be their trial run, if nothing else.

“I have a few ideas,” Will said with a smile, “I don’t know if I told you much about how I killed Abel Gideon and Doctor Chilton. Would you like to hear, while you do your searching?”

Hannibal hummed a confirmation, already busy tapping away at his tablet. Will shifted to lay down on the couch, setting his head in Hannibal’s lap. He felt good, and safe. He wasn’t especially tired, but he thought he might doze a little. He didn’t have another lecture for a while, and it wasn’t as if Jack needed them back at the labs. Hannibal would wake him up if he needed to see a patient. He was just basking in the feeling of safety and love only Hannibal could give him.

Will told Hannibal about what had happened with Abel Gideon, and how he had been given the pleasant surprise of Chilton already being at his mercy. He could feel Hannibal’s approval and pleasure as he detailed how he had killed Gideon, and how he had harnessed his anger to do it. His own ideas of how they would face this artist crystalized in his mind as he spoke, and eventually Hannibal put aside his tablet to stroke his fingers through Will’s hair.

This is what their life could be forever. They could stay this way, together, and things could be easy.

As difficult as it was for Will to believe, he knew it. He could see the future laid out before them, stretching on into eternity or whatever end awaited them, and he could see that this was a clear path they could take. If they just remembered what they had, and didn’t try to change it. If they could just remember how hard it had been to get here, and how much pain they had endured to do it. If they could just remember how much they needed each other.

Because they wouldn’t survive separation.

Eventually, Will did doze a little. Hannibal allowed it, as always taking the chance to soak up Will’s presence. After the hardships they had both been through, entirely due to his decisions, it was difficult for him to entirely believe this could last. It was an insecurity they shared, even as they both knew how things would end between them if they ever did. Hannibal was confident they would overcome the fear of losing each other, and he was grateful for the second chance he was being given.

Will was a cruel god, but not an entirely unfair one. There was a righteous justice about him, even in his darkest moments.

Hannibal could not wait to see him in all his glory.

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James Gray looked upon his work, nearly finished. It would have been complete now, if Roland Umber had not torn himself free and run away. That boy had possessed the most

wonderful skin. It was a shame he had not died of the overdose, giving him the chance to leave.

No matter. Another piece would be found soon enough.

“Hello,” an accented voice called from above, making James pause and look toward the roof of the silo, “I love your work.”

James Gray was not someone who had often been praised for his high intelligence. He had never been called brilliant. That being said, he understood the implications of a man finding the mosaic. He either had been caught, or he would be soon. Even if the man claimed to admire the artwork, James could not trust him.

James knew it would take the man some time to descend the rungs along the outside of the silo, so he was in no rush as he made his way back to the door. He felt oddly numb, disappointed he would have to leave the work unfinished. But it was for the best. He had no intention of going to prison. He thought it more appropriate to throw himself from the cliff. The one that boy had jumped from in his desperation to escape becoming a piece of the art.

James opened the door and again halted, coming face to face with yet another man.

This man had a bright grin, and a light in his eyes that James thought could only come from pure insanity. He hefted a long handled axe, the kind used for splitting logs. James was more afraid of him than he was of the man at the top of the silo. This man was frightening to behold.

“Glad we caught you when we did,” the man said, a deep southern twang to the words, “I told him you ought to be near done by now. And a good thing, too, since the FBI’s hot on your tail.”

James took a step back, glancing up to the roof, where the other man was still peeking down at him. He couldn’t see that man very well, the distance and the backlighting making him just a vague silhouette in the center of the iris.

“Are you here to kill me?” James asked, afraid that they weren’t.

The man with the axe stepped into the silo, following James with sure feet and a steady gaze. His eyes were sharp and cutting, and James didn’t like that. He felt exposed and dissected, which was an uncomfortable sensation that he had never experienced before.

“We are here to help,” the voice from above called calmly, “we would like to see your finished work.”

James frowned. He wasn’t finished, and he couldn’t imagine how they thought they could help. He didn’t need help, either. He preferred to work alone.

“What does this eye see?” the southern man asked, waving his hand to the mosaic without looking away from James, “this eye that gazes up into heaven? It’s searching for God, isn’t it? Does it find God there?”

James shook his head.

“The eye is empty,” he said, “there is no god.”

A laugh trickled down from above, drawing James’ attention to the first man again. He was becoming disoriented from the constant switching back and forth. He didn’t like this at all, but he was trapped here, with his masterpiece unfinished.

“Certainly not with that attitude,” the voice from above said, “but I think *my* god can help you with that.”

The southern man chuffed, adjusting his grip on the axe.

“Flatterer,” he muttered, just before swinging the weapon at James’ knee.

Chapter End Notes

And thus ends the reign of he muralist. I hope the changes of POV weren't too jarring or seemed wrong. I wanted to show how Will appears on the outside, when he's in his axe murderer mind XD I love letting him use an axe. I just love it.
Also, Hannibal and Will's POVs sort of overlap a bit at times this chapter, which they will continue to do in the last chapter. Because they're blurring. You know.

Up next: Hannibal and Will cook together, and plan their future.

I'm tempted to post the last chapter early, but the night I have scheduled is a full moon, and I find that kind of poetic. I'll throw myself a little bit of a party, and try not to make it feel too much like a wake. Because this fic has been such a huge part of my life since I started writing it over a year ago. I am going to be sad that it's over. You're probably all sick of reading that in my notes, but I'm just so sad about it.

102

Chapter Summary

Reflections

Chapter Notes

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour
A Robin Red breast in a Cage
Puts all Heaven in a Rage
A Dove house filld with Doves & Pigeons
Shudders Hell thr' all its regions
A dog starvd at his Masters Gate
Predicts the ruin of the State

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“And you wanted these cut how?” Will asked, overwhelmed by the complexity of the dish Hannibal wanted them to make together. Part of him was convinced Hannibal had chosen this dish just so Will would keep having to ask for help.

Hannibal appeared at Will’s back in an instant, smiling as he set his hands over Will’s.

“Simply dice them,” he said smoothly, showing Will how it was meant to look, “you are doing well.”

Will snorted.

“I know how to cook and you know it,” he said, shrugging Hannibal off, “I just don’t make such a big deal out of it as you do. We’re both lucky I didn’t end up ruining that cut from Abel. You sure you want me to help with this? I could stop now, before anything’s ruined.”

Hannibal hummed pleasantly, turning to his own part of the project. Will didn’t understand every part of what the dish entailed, but he was grateful Hannibal seemed to have taken the more complicated steps for himself. Maybe he didn’t intend Will to make a *complete* fool of himself tonight.

“If you truly do not want to help, I will not force you,” Hannibal said, a hint of humor in his voice, “but I truly do desire your hand in this. You have said you want to be a part of my life, of every part of my life, and this is something I truly enjoy doing together, especially now. You have cooked for me, and I have cooked for you, but we have not cooked together while we have both known the source of the meat. I think there will not be a better time for it.”

Will sighed, understanding exactly what Hannibal was saying. And he agreed, on some level, though he thought Hannibal considered it a lot more significant than it really was. This was their first kill together, and Hannibal wanted them to prepare the meal together as well. It made sense, and Will would do it if only to make Hannibal happy. He just wasn’t as obsessed with the idea as Hannibal was.

“Alright, let’s just get this cooking. I’m starved.”

Hannibal smiled and continued with his own work, pleased to have Will’s participation. They understood each other, even if they didn’t always agree with the other.

“We should invite Beverly over for dinner sometime,” Will said after another while, his brow furrowed with concentration as he attempted not to mess up the work he was doing, “and maybe Alana and Miriam. I’m curious how they’re getting on. Maybe we should just invite everyone from work, and their partners, just so we don’t make anyone jealous.”

Hannibal smiled fondly, as always amused by his partner’s antics. Will didn’t want their company any more than Hannibal did. In fact, he might want them to come over even less than Hannibal did. But he was always playing games with their acquaintances, and this was certainly a part of one or the other.

“You are incapable of not making them jealous,” Hannibal teased, “though of course you meant jealous of each other. In that vein, perhaps we could, but I rather think some of them would consider it a way you are showing off.”

Will grinned.

“Brian doesn’t have to come if he doesn’t want to,” he said, “but we should invite him just so he doesn’t feel left out. If Jimmy can drag him along, maybe they’ll finally realize what the rest of us see.”

Hannibal laughed.

“You truly do intend to play cupid within the bureau,” he said, pleased by the idea even as it was somewhat exasperating to be a part of, “do you think to distract them with their own relationships so they are less likely to suspect us?”

Will shrugged.

“Sure couldn’t hurt,” he said, “and maybe I just want them all to be happy. Ever think of that?”

Hannibal hummed in amusement. The fact that Will had not yet tried to set Beverly up with someone was the clearest indication that it was nearly all a game to him. Beverly had voiced her comfort in being single, and Will had accepted it immediately, while still meddling in the love lives of everyone else if he could find a foothold. Jack was the only other one immune, being happily married to his delightful wife. The slight tension there was off limits, apparently, which Hannibal abided by as well. He liked Bella enough that it was not too much of a burden to keep to himself.

Will had blossomed in the time since Hannibal had first laid eyes on him in the waiting room of his office. He was no longer the trembling, frightened man who had been unable to come within five feet of Hannibal for fear of having a panic attack. While he still had his bad days, some when he could not leave the house, he confided in Hannibal that even those were not nearly as severe as they had once been. He rarely struggled to breathe, even during those bad days.

Hannibal's own nightmares, which had become much more intense and stressful during the time Will was angry with him, had dwindled again to what he had become used to, and on the rare occasion when they did appear, Will was there to comfort him.

It was strange to have comfort like that available, as Hannibal had gone all his life without it. He was eternally grateful to Will for it, and would attempt to show his love and gratitude every day he was allowed. He knew Will sometimes became overwhelmed with his liberal use of praise and gestures of affection, but that too had been slowly improving as they spent more and more time together.

Seeing Will kill the artist had been quite possibly the second most exultant experience of his life, following only the experience of butchering the man with Will in order to put him on the table tonight. They had sewn him into the center of the eye, letting the eye of god always be filled with their work. Will had been insistent that they complete the work, possibly seeing how much Hannibal had wanted to see it complete. They both felt their modification had improved the result. Their own interpretation of the original artist's work. A secret for just the two of them which would hang as the jewel of their first combined work, setting a standard of work for them both which they would build upon for the rest of their lives.

Hannibal was curious what the team at the FBI would make of their work, how long it would take them to realize the killer they were hunting was the centerpiece of the artwork he had created. Will had voiced that they might realize it was the work of the Ripper, seeing as he was killed with an axe just as Abel Gideon had been, and Hannibal could see that thought excited him. Jack would begin seeing the Ripper in everything again, afraid his methods were changing and he could be hiding in plain sight. The man would jump at shadows and suspect only all the wrong people.

That was a game Hannibal was *certainly* allowed to play with Agent Crawford.

"How would you feel about a vacation?" Hannibal asked, making Will halt in his work and turn with a raised eyebrow.

"I'm guessing you don't just mean laying around at home like we do all the time on our days off," he said, "you mean actually going somewhere. Where are you thinking?"

Hannibal smiled. His entire chest felt full to bursting with the affection he felt for Will, and every time he laid eyes on the other man or heard his wonderful voice it became all that more intense of a sensation. If he had known just a year prior that he would feel such things for Will, he would have been frightened of it. Now, it was a comfort. His own memento mori, reminding him not only of his mortality, but also of his humanity.

“I would like to show you Florence, Will,” he said, “it is where I became a man. And where I reigned as a monster.”

Will studied Hannibal for a long moment, likely trying to parse out if there were ulterior motives for this suggestion. Hannibal was sure he couldn’t predict what Will might think about it, but he hoped Will would not see everything. There were yet to be some surprised in their future, and Hannibal hoped to never become boring to his beloved.

“Could we make a stop in New Orleans to visit Macy first?” Will asked, “I mighta kinda promised her I would try to drag you down there. She wants to chew you out for hurtin’ my feelings.”

Hannibal grinned. Will’s accent slipped out more frequently, now, when he was particularly relaxed or pleased. When he was annoyed, his voice became cold with no hint of his southern roots. Hannibal thought it must partially be a punishment, even if it was subconscious. Because Will knew how he adored the way his lips and tongue formed words with that particular flavor or his roots.

“It would be a pleasure,” he said, “I have apologies to make to her, certainly. She did warn me beforehand.”

Will smiled.

“What else did she say to you at the funeral?” he asked, “She wouldn’t tell me. Said I’d have to ask you.”

Hannibal cast his mind back, thinking fondly of the determined young woman who had pulled him aside at her father’s funeral, thinking of Will despite her own grief. He admired her immensely, and he was glad Will had people like that in his life.

“She told me that her father’s letter was likely to dredge up unpleasant things, and you would find out something you didn’t want to know. She told me to be there for you through it, if I could. She also told me that you do not need me, so I should not think you are helpless and vulnerable. She told me so certainly that if I hurt you, you would not hesitate to cut me off and hurt me in return. She was right on all counts.”

Will considered that in silence for a long time. Hannibal thought back over how Will had reacted to learning the truth. He had been ruthless in his pursuit of punishment for Hannibal, and Hannibal did not think anything he had done was unfair. Hannibal had allowed Will to become wracked with worry and guilt over months, knowing that lying was what Will despised over all else. He could have ended that torment much earlier, yet had not, due to his own selfishness. Will’s reaction had been much kinder than he could have been.

Will would have been entirely within his rights to kill Hannibal or have him imprisoned. Hannibal was pleased he had done neither of those things, but he recognized that anyone else would think Will should have.

“Alright,” Will said, smiling distantly, “let’s take a vacation. I’m sure Jack would be pleased to have a break from us, even if he doesn’t know it.”

Hannibal was pleased.

The osso buco would take several hours yet, and Hannibal thought they could find something to entertain them while the food baked.

They had many things to look forward to in their combined future. While they were both anxious to get there, they would not let a moment go by unappreciated.

Chapter End Notes

There you have it. A year and a half after I started us all on this journey, and it's over. For us, at least. Hannibal and Will, of course, are spending some wonderful months traveling together, and they're perfectly happy. We should leave them to it.

If anyone wants to talk to me about this fic, ask me questions, or anything, come see me on Tumblr @justhannigramfics
I'll be eating jambalaya and ice cream for a few hours as I watch the moon rise, and thinking about what I'll do with my life now that this fic is actually finished.
I hope you all enjoyed it, and that the world is kind to us all.

Up next: bigger and better things, god willing

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